

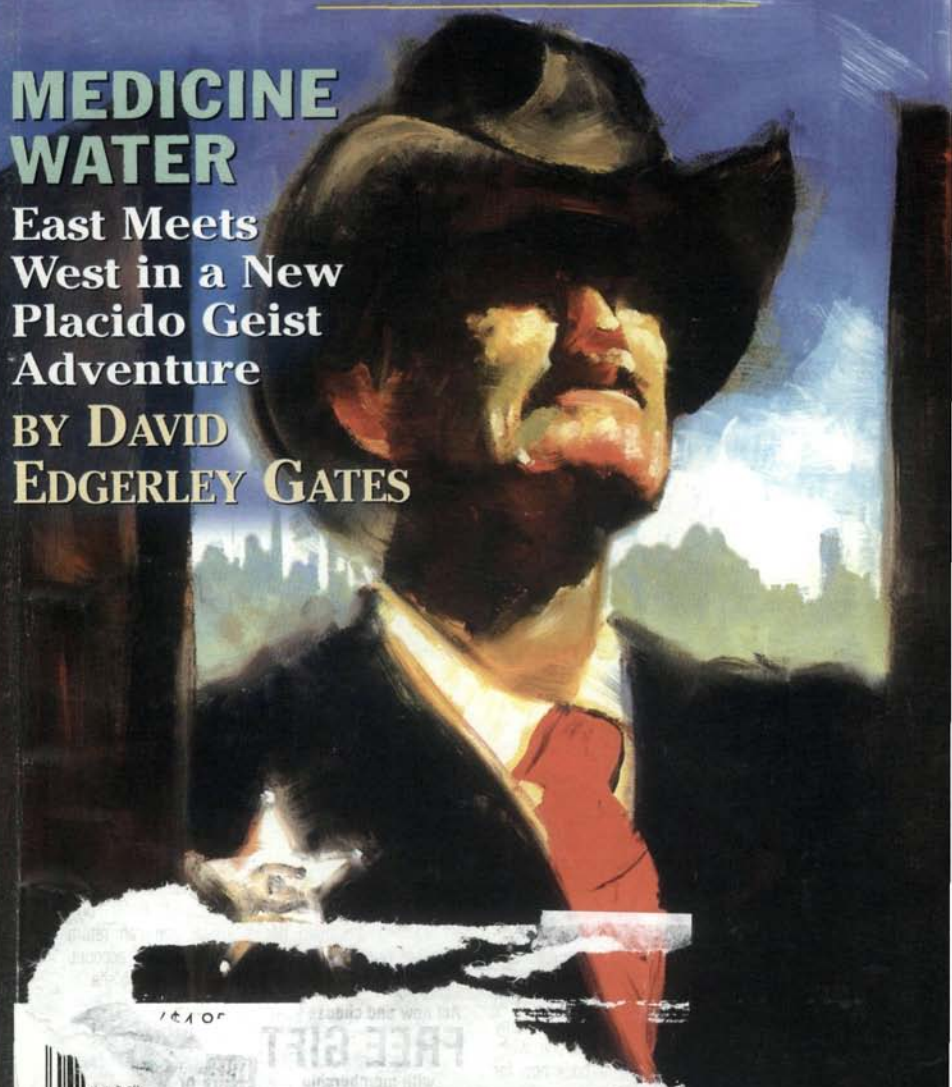
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 2002

MEDICINE WATER

**East Meets
West in a New
Placido Geist
Adventure**

**BY DAVID
EDGERLEY GATES**



**And More Stories
of Crime and Mystery**

LICENSED TO UNE.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

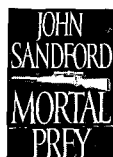


6452 \$26.06 17c



6908 \$24.06 17c

MYSTERIES SO GRIPPING...



6336* \$26.06 17c



6890* \$26.06 17c

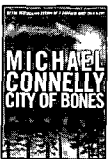


6601 \$24.06 17c

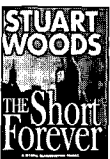
You'll
hang on
to every
word



6817 \$26.06 17c



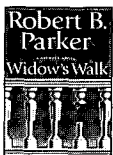
6395 \$26.06 17c



6171 \$24.06 17c



6163* \$26.06 17c



6304* \$24.06 17c



6270 \$26.06 17c



6031 \$24.06 17c



6353 \$24.06 17c



6288* \$26.06 17c



5025 \$26.06 17c

You'll always save up to 60% off every book as a member!

1. Membership is easy. Just buy 6 books for 99¢. Send no money now. Your 6 selections will arrive along with your bill (including shipping, handling and applicable taxes) when membership is confirmed (unless otherwise notified). You'll also receive your choice of a FREE Umbrella and Tote Set or a FREE 7th Book. **2. Your satisfaction is guaranteed.** If you're not happy with your introductory books, return them within 10 days at our expense. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE GIFT is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **3. Save up to 60% off publishers' edition prices.** Every book we offer is a high-quality, full-text edition sometimes altered in size. Just purchase at least 4 more books at regular Club prices within 2 years. (Shipping, handling and applicable taxes are added to each order.) After buying 4 books you may resign at any time or remain a member for as long as you wish. **4. More savings now!** Buy an additional book now for

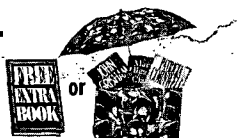
just \$3.99, plus shipping, handling and applicable taxes, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books.

5. A FREE Club Magazine is sent to you up to 19 times a year (about every 3 weeks). Each issue reviews the Main Selections and a variety of alternate books. Some are exclusive Club editions you won't find anywhere else.

6. Ordering is risk-free. Main Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel shipment—or order other books—simply return your Member Reply Form or contact our Web site by the marked date. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, you can return them at our expense and we'll credit your account.

7. Easy ordering through the mail or via our Web site.

Act now and choose your
FREE GIFT
with membership



*Explicit scenes and/or language. All prices are current as we go to press.

Mystery Guild® is a registered trademark of Doubleday Direct, Inc. Used under license. All rights reserved.

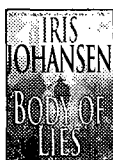
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



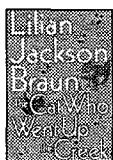
5959* \$26.06 17¢



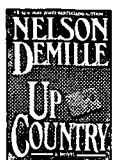
5967 \$26.06 17¢



6148* \$24.06 17¢



5843 \$22.06 17¢



4226 \$26.06 17¢



5538 \$27.06 17¢



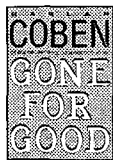
2725 \$26.06 17¢



1248* \$26.06 17¢



6189 \$26.06 17¢



6213 \$22.06 17¢



6858 \$26.06 17¢



5439 \$26.06 17¢



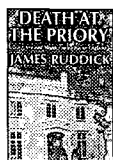
6023 \$26.06 17¢



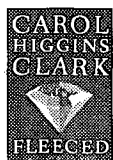
5793 \$24.06 17¢



6080* \$26.06 17¢



5876 \$24.06 17¢



5009 \$22.06 17¢



5447 \$26.06 17¢



5512* \$26.06 17¢



5520* \$26.06 17¢



6957 \$22.06 17¢

Grab hold of **6** mysteries for **99¢** with membership

W935 AHC 9/1/02



www.JoinMysteryGuild.com
or AOL Keyword: Mystery Guild

MAIL TO:
Mystery Guild®
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

☐ **YES!** Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild®* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. I'm sending no money now. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping, handling and applicable taxes. Also send the FREE GIFT of my choice. I agree to buy 4 more books in the next 2 years.

Mr./Mrs. _____
Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Home telephone, please: (____) _____

Please sign _____
(If under 18, parent must sign)

Sales tax added where applicable. Membership accepted in U.S.A. only.
Membership subject to approval.

08. ### ## 08 09 GT431 ← Online Code

Please write book numbers here:

Choose your
FREE GIFT
with membership



Choose your **FREE BONUS GIFT** here:

☐ FREE Umbrella & Tote Set (#9977)
☐ OR FREE 7th Book

Please write book number here: _____

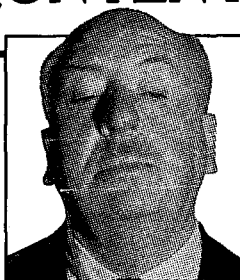
--	--	--	--

SAVE MORE NOW! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added \$3.99, plus shipping and handling.

Please write book number here: _____

--	--	--	--

CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

THE FRIED CRAB AFFAIR by Charlotte D'Aigle	6
MEDICINE WATER by David Edgerley Gates	24
FALLOUT by William F. Hallstead	49
THE CASE OF THE FRACTURED PUZZLE by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.	62
KELSO'S GHOST by Malcolm McClintick	91
JACKS by L. A. Wilson, Jr.	112

MYSTERY CLASSIC

LARS BLOM AND HIS DISAPPEARING GUN by August Blanche	128
--	------------

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	61
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	90
SOLUTION TO THE JULY/AUGUST "UNSOLVED"	127
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	139
THE STORY THAT WON	142

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (USPS:523-590, ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 47, No. 9, September, 2002. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$39.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$49.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 2002 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

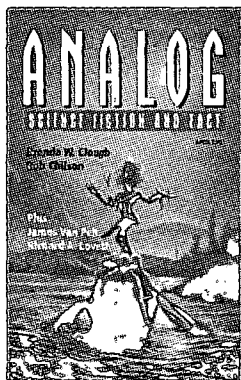
Printed in Canada

Cover by J. F. Martin

TOUR THE UNIVERSE

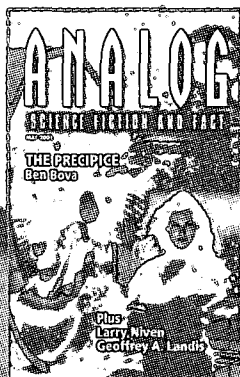
Just
\$6.95!

Save
60%



Explore the boundaries of imagination with the Analog Science Fiction Value Pack.

You get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!



Complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment.

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☒ **YES!** Please send me my **Analog Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of \$_____ is enclosed.

(AFPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 9/30/03.

82C-NANVL1

EDITORIAL NOTES

Linda Landrigan

I am pleased to return to AHMM where I worked for nearly five years alongside its former editor, Cathleen Jordan. Since 1956 AHMM has published top-rate mystery stories, showcasing both established and up-and-coming writers. Whether the stories feature murder laced with black humor, crimes both impulsive and premeditated (and their consequences), or brain-teasing puzzles, they are always the finest and most well-crafted. In the literary world we are a bit of an anomaly. We are one of the few monthly publications today to focus on—and celebrate—short stories, and yet the short story is a thriving literary form. And the stories in this issue, as always, capture and recapitulate themes that have informed much of Western literature.

In our title story this month, age has not diminished the mystique of bounty hunter Placido Geist—for either the reader or his companion Deputy Sheriff Benny Salvador. The two men wander the desert tracking an unusual desperado and pursuing justice. Theirs is an American West at a liminal period between old and new, the limitless land soon to be hemmed in by an ambitious nation's growth and domestication. These two men, like the stranger they are after, float uncomfortably between heaven and earth. More than a western, "Medicine Water" by David Edgerley Gates is a story about the search for absolution and the lust for revenge.

Revenge, set in motion by our strongest, untempered feelings, acts like a bullet cutting a blind

LINDA LANDRIGAN, Editor

JONAS ENO-VAN FLEET, Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI, Executive Director, Art and Production

VICTORIA GREEN, Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE, Associate Art Director

CAROLE DIXON, Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING, Manager, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW, Vice President, Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE, Circulation Services

JULIA McEVoy, Manager, Advertising Sales

CONNIE GOON, Advertising Sales Coordinator

Advertising Representatives:

David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 455-0100 (Display Advertising)

PETER KANTER, Publisher

Visit us online at www.themysteryplace.com.

swath through a crowd: it takes down more than its intended target; it ruins lives and sets in motion a cycle of pain and hatred. Two other stories in this issue turn on this powerful motivation. In "Fallout," the suspicious death of a flying instructor and its sad consequences have its roots in revenge. For a P.I. and former cop suffering from paranoia in L. A. Wilson, Jr.'s "Jacks," money, racism, and a false accusation fuel a range of passionate reactions.

Elsewhere in the issue in "The Fried Crab Affair," "unruly passions" settle on the characters of Charlotte D'Aigle's backwater southern Louisiana town like the region's oppressive muggy weather. Old fears, themselves as cloying as humidity, resurface for Detective George Kelso when he investigates a murder in a haunted house in "Kelso's Ghost."

"The Case of the Fractured Puzzle" is Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s carefully crafted whodunit featuring the redoubtable Lady Sara Varnley. This marks the Victorian sleuth's fourth appearance in AHM, but Mr. Biggle has had a long association with our sister magazines, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*. He also has a new science fiction novel out, *The Chronocide Mission*, published by Wildside Press (www.wildsidepress.com).

This month's delightful Mys-

tery Classic is "Lars Blom and His Disappearing Gun" by August Blanche. The crafty gardener Lars Blom is a true hero for the working class. August Blanche (1811–1868) was a Swedish politician, journalist, advocate of social reforms, and mystery writer. This story comes from his collection, *Hyrkuskens berättelser*, which



August Blanche

translates as *The Stories of a Horse-Cab Coachman*, and was brought to our attention by the translator, Bertil Falk, the editor of *Dast Magazine*, one of the world's oldest magazines concerning mystery and detective literature. A retired newspaper and television journalist in London and Sweden, Mr. Falk has also written a number of his own mystery novels and has translated the stories of Edward D. Hoch, one of the field's most prolific short story writers, into Swedish.

FICTION

THE FRIED CRAB AFFAIR

Charlotte D'Aigle



Illustration by Ron Chirorma

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/02

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It started innocently enough. All I wanted to do was take my girlfriend for a drive in the country to get away from lesson plans and raucous children and see the horizon stretching out before us with no interchanges or bank buildings to block the view.

It was spring break. That morning, we left the city's bustle and cruised out through the outskirts, which dropped off quickly. Soon we were rolling through level pastureland punctuated by windbreaks of towering pines.

Since it was spring in the south Louisiana countryside, wild irises poked out of gleaming ditches and the morning air caressed instead of seared, as it would a month from now. We drove with a vague idea of reaching the gulf, intending to stop at a roadside cafe and meander down birding byways hoping for a glimpse of marsh creatures.

A white steepled church announced a tiny town and we slowed as we passed along its shady main street. A few tidy houses, a gas station with two pumps, and a small store completed the town, and then we moved out into open pasture again. It was that kind of country.

Miles down the road, Marilee shouted, "Fried crabs!"

Startled, I slowed the Chevy.

"Back there?" We had passed a shabby white roadhouse on the left. She craned her head around.

"On the sign! Fried crabs." Her blue eyes glittered. "Jay, turn around and go back!"

I made a U-turn and pulled into the white shell parking lot in front

of the roadhouse, a typical-looking eating and drinking establishment in rural Louisiana. Nothing fancy, these joints invariably have the best food, with prices that make you feel you've stepped back in time.

The yellow sign indeed announced, FRIED CRABS. Though it was early, there were already a few cars in the parking lot.

"I love fried crabs," said Marilee. "Let's have dinner."

"It's only eleven," I protested.

"Then let's have an early dinner." And that's how it started.

A faded sign on the weathered storefront above the door said ARCENEAUX'S. Inside, a wide, open room held Formica tables with beat-up chairs and picnic tables to accommodate larger parties. Deer-hunting trophies and fishing paraphernalia decorated the walls. The place had a run-down but friendly demeanor.

A bar ran alongside a far wall with memorabilia—curling photos, street signs, license plates—as a backdrop. A middle-aged man sat on a stool at the bar hunched over a beer. He had a dark beard flecked with gray, longish flyaway hair, and a stocky build. His overalls made his body look fuller than it was. A thin older man stood next to him holding a beer bottle. Behind the counter, the fortyish bartender wielded a dishtowel, waving it as he talked. He had a tough, wiry build and short, dark hair with pointed features. A faded auburn-haired woman wearing an apron stood next to him, listening with a sad expression.

They talked in tense, emotional tones in the rich cadences of Cajun country. As we approached, they stopped talking and looked at us. The bartender came away from the bar, waved his dishtowel in welcome, and said, "Hey. Y'all come on in."

Marilee asked, "Have you got crabs today?"

"*Mais bien sur!* Fresh as they come. Real sweet. Not too big yet, but sweet." He touched his lips in a gesture of ecstasy. "I'm Alvin Arce-neaux. Sit yourself down."

He brought over plastic glasses of tepid water and forks. Napkins were a roll of paper towels in a holder on the table. We ordered ice teas and two fried crab dinners, which came with french fries, cole slaw, and a pistolette—a fried bread roll.

I noticed that the two men at the bar had resumed talking, but in lowered voices. The auburn-haired woman headed for the kitchen, presumably to fry up our crabs.

The front door creaked on its hinges and a young brunette with two toddlers in tow came in. She headed straight for the door to the kitchen and shouted, "Lucy!"

The proprietor, still carrying the dishtowel, approached her.

She turned to him. "My order ready, Alvin?"

"Hold on, Cynt, let me check. Lucy!"

Lucy of the auburn hair emerged from the kitchen with two styro-foam containers. Her shoulders drooped and I thought she looked tired.

"Hey, Bernard. Tibo," Cynt said

to the two men at the bar. "Y'all solved it yet? Know who kilt her?"

The two men surveyed her darkly. Lucy stood there looking at her with an unreadable expression.

"Turrble thing," the thin, standing-up man muttered. "Turrble. Poor Annaline."

"She had it comin', is how I'm thinkin'," said Cynt, narrowing her eyes.

"Don't speak ill, now," said Alvin sharply. Lucy went back to the kitchen and hit the swinging door a bit too hard. It kept swaying on its hinges with a squeaking noise. We could hear the clattering of pans in the kitchen.

Cynt shrugged, paid for her order, and holding the cartons under one arm, steered her children to the door with the other.

"Bye!" she said as she departed with a smile on her face.

The men at the bar looked down at their beers with grim expressions. The thin man swore in words I couldn't hear.

Alvin, the proprietor, sauntered over to our table.

"Y'all heard about the killin' last night?"

I almost choked on my tea and Marilee fixed him with a look.

"Killing? Guess not," I said.

"Thought y'all might be here checkin' out the place," he said. "You know how everybody likes to go see where people got drowned or kilt."

"No," I said. "We're just driving to the gulf."

"They found her this mornin' over to Bayou Broussard. Dugas here," he motioned to the man sit-

ting at the bar, "was goin' out to fish and there was Annaline, just lyin' there in the shallows."

At the mention of his name, Dugas lifted his head and turned to look at us, then went back to his beer, morosely silent.

Alvin began to hit his stride.

"She was chewed up real good. Yeah. Real good. They musta been at her since she was kilt. Could hardly tell it was Annaline 'cept for that yeller dress she always wore. Yeah, they chewed her good."

"You mean . . . ?" I said.

"Crabs," he said.

Just then the door to the kitchen opened and Lucy emerged with two huge round trays heaped with fried crabs.

Alvin must have seen my expression because he added, "Oh, those ain't the ones. Those come from Deep Lake. They brought 'em off the boat."

"That's nice," I mumbled, surveying the fried crabs. They weren't the biggest I'd ever seen—it was early in the season—but by the sheer volume it looked like we'd be here for a while picking them out. Well, what else did Marilee and I have to do this afternoon but laze away the day picking crabs and hearing about a "killin'?"

Marilee wasn't put off by this talk and smiled her dimples at me over her crab mountain.

"Thanks for doing this, Jay," she said, and started to rip a crab apart with her delicate hands.

I smiled back but kept picturing crabs tearing at Annaline's white body the way they tear at stew

meat at the end of a line. I stared at the crabs on my plate.

"They're wonderful!" said Marilee, grinning. "Dig in!"

The crabs did smell good. My senses overrode my sensibilities and I dived into the heap. They could well have been the best crabs I'd ever tasted, the meat succulent and sweet (just as Alvin promised), and the hint of a batter on the outside just tasty and salty enough to give the delicate meat inside the right extra flavor.

"This is a religious experience," Marilee said between bites.

Alvin came over to check on us and we both nodded, smiling. He refilled our tea glasses.

"Knew you'd like 'em," he said, and went back behind the bar.

We spent the midday hours picking crabs and talking about school problems. I was glad to be out with Marilee in the country, even if the day was turning out to be a bit strange. We ate the pistolettes and the slaw and about half the fries and I began calculating how long my next workout would have to be. I found the pounds didn't roll off as fast now that I was in my thirties.

I went to take a leak—down the hall to the left—and found Dugas, the gloomy man at the bar, in the head.

"Too bad about the girl," I said. "You finding her and all."

He was drunk and swayed where he stood.

"Ain't so bad," he said almost inaudibly.

"I'm sorry, did you say . . . ?" I thought I'd heard him wrong.

"Ain't so damn bad, is what I

said. She got what she deserved. You know her?"

"No, I'm not from around here. Sounds like you did. Know her."

He zipped up and swayed again, and almost fell over backwards. He caught himself and straightened up. He talked in that slow, deliberate way that drunks have when they're trying not to slur their words.

"I knew her awright. I had her. And she had me. The filthy *putain*."

He had called her a whore. This was getting heavy. I decided to change the subject.

"The police must have questioned you about it."

"Yeah. They was here." He swore in Cajun.

I wondered how much anybody had told the police. My guess would be plain nothing.

"I got her good, though," he said gruffly, and then had a coughing fit.

"Well, you take care of yourself," I said lamely as I walked to the door. He exited, too, and I saw him head out the side door, wobbling a bit.

Back in the restaurant, Alvin caught my eye and indicated the hallway with his eyes.

"Hard luck, ain't it. Findin' her like that. Dugas's tore up pretty bad."

"That's tough," I said, thinking that Dugas had an odd way of grieving. I was ready to get on our way as soon as Marilee came back from the restroom. The thin man at the bar had left, too.

"'Course we all tore up over An-naline. We all liked her."

"Looks like somebody didn't."

"None a us round here. She was our darlin'. Our *jolie blonde*."

"They know how she died?"

"The ones who pulled her out said you could hardly tell, she was so chewed up. All I know is, she ate a bowl a gumbo in here kinda late. Sat right there in that chair." He pointed to a table and chair near the bar. She left to go home and that's all she wrote."

"What makes you think it's murder? Maybe she drowned."

"That's what I said, but everybody says it's a killin'. They say," he indicated the bar with a sweep of his dishtowel, "nobody drowns in the marsh at night. Somebuddy put you there."

"They've got a point."

Marilee came back and we thanked Alvin and asked him to give our compliments to Chef Lucy, who he said was resting in a back room. Alvin invited us back, saying the crabs were out there "turnin' into the sweetest bluewaters you ever tasted."

Marilee and I cruised on toward the gulf, walked out on a nature trail flush with pink primroses, amorous alligators growling their affection at one another, and a new crop of brown bunny rabbits. Definitely spring. We spotted egrets, blue herons, redwing blackbirds, and even a couple of roseate spoonbills. By the time we drove back to the city it was late, and we decided to scrap our plan to see a movie.

After our fried crab dinner we'd sworn to stop talking shop and the afternoon should have been relaxing. Marilee was lighthearted, but

I was distracted. I kept thinking of Dugas and his passion and contempt when he said he'd "had her." It bothered me. I hadn't mentioned it to Marilee. I recalled that murderers often get caught because they boast about their deed in bars. It was the chilling words *I got her good* that set my imagination working. I wondered if I'd heard the confession of a killer.

I left Marilee's early and turned in but couldn't sleep. Should I do something about what I'd heard? The question kept me awake. On the one hand, why should I get involved in a tangle that was probably a crime of passion against a local looker—or maybe even a hooker? Surely the police would unravel the murder and corral the likely suspects.

The next day, the newspaper didn't give any indication this had happened. All the article said was that it was murder—the victim was dead before entering the water—and the police were asking anyone with information to come forward. I groaned. Was one of those *moi*? Could hearing a muttering drunk in a men's room be considered "information"?

The report included a photo of Annaline Bertrand, a pretty blonde with a dreamy look in her eyes and a hint of come-hither sexiness. I hated thinking of the *jolie blonde* of the photo as crab bait.

I don't know if it was guilt or curiosity that made me drive out to Arceneaux's the next day. Actually, I'd always been a bit of a busybody, "pokin' your nose where it don't belong," according to my dad. Marilee

had gone out of town to spend a few days with her mother, and for once I was glad she wasn't with me.

Arceneaux's was mostly empty except for a couple with a kid at a small table sharing a platter of fried crabs supplemented with bowls of gumbo. I spotted Dugas at the bar with a beer. The thin older man stood there, too, drinking. I wondered if they were regulars, or if Annaline's demise had pushed them over the brink.

Alvin came over with a smile and said, "They just cain't stay away, can they," and waved me to a table. When he brought my glass of water, he raised his eyebrows in a question, "Where's the crab lover?"

I smiled and shrugged. "Didn't come. What's good today? Besides crabs?"

Alvin shook his head. "I knew she was the crab one of the two. We got shrimp gumbo."

I ordered that and coffee. When Alvin brought the gumbo, I said, "Any news on the case?"

Alvin frowned. "You one of them reporters out here to catch a story?"

I shook my head. "Just curious. Read the paper but it didn't say much."

"That's 'cause they don't know much."

He added, "They came back again, the pleece, askin' if we knew of anything hereabouts. They jumped on Dugas here 'cause he was one of the ones who knew her best." He winked at Dugas's back. Dugas turned and looked at us with a stony expression. He went back to his beer.

Alvin moved on to the couple

with the kid and I spooned rice into my gumbo. The shrimp were firm and the roux was flavorful. Hunks of crab and slices of okra swirled in the gumbo's dark delicious depths, and I found myself eating slowly to savor it. What a find this place was, I thought, with prices a fraction of those in the city. Of course, even in the country you had your mayhem and murder, but the food was sure better.

I finished and paid the bill and sat nursing a second cup of coffee, wondering why I'd made the drive to dine in this roadhouse and contemplate moral choices. The thin man I now knew as Tibo stood near the kitchen talking to Lucy. Dugas had not left the bar, but now he got up and staggered toward the men's room. I figured he would exit through the side door again.

I left a few bucks on the table and strolled slowly out to the parking lot in front. Dugas got in the battered truck he had parked at the side of the restaurant and headed off in the direction of the gulf. I had a vague notion that I'd like to talk to him and clear everything up. I was also curious to see what he was up to. I got in my car and followed at a discreet distance.

A few miles farther, he turned onto a narrow levee road. I stayed on the main road but parked the Chevy and got out the binoculars we used for birdwatching. I saw the truck slow at a wider point on the levee and pull off to the side. Dugas got out and walked down by an old ruined pier. Checking his crabbing or fishing spot, I imagined.

I had a bad moment when I won-

dered if that was the spot where Annaline had been found, but then realized a man like Dugas would have many spots to fish and crab. I sat in the car and waited while Dugas tinkered with something near the pier. Soon his truck bumped back down the levee and he headed back in the direction we'd come. When his truck was out of sight, I turned down the road, which had a prominent "Posted—No Trespassing" sign. If he came back, I could always claim to be birdwatching.

I drove the Chevy slowly until I got to the wide spot and pulled over. I couldn't see anybody in any direction, just trucks with oil company insignia speeding down the highway.

The day was still mild, but moisture had blown in from the gulf, spreading a gray cloud cover over the area. A breeze licked the water and raised little ripples that made the marsh look like a body of water rather than a network of meandering waterways.

The place where Dugas had been mucking around looked ordinary. There was nothing there but a broken-down pier. From the rusty debris scattered around the area, I surmised this had been a good crabbing—or necking—spot in the past. Nails in the pier still held old crab lines that were disintegrating.

I decided to walk down to the water and peer in, as city folk do at the marsh. As I descended the bank to the water, my tennis shoe slipped on a muddy spot and I grabbed at a piece of the old pier to break my fall. The rotten wood came off in

my hand and I slid but didn't actually fall into the mud, for which I was grateful. I stared at the old pier, thinking it a good subject for one of Marilee's watercolors.

A plastic bag hung from the underside of the pier. The piece of wood I had ripped off had kept it from sight and now it hung there, exposed. I wondered if Dugas kept bait here. A ray of sun caught a glint of metal and I knew the bag didn't hold bait.

Maneuvering slowly up the muddy rise and under the rotting pier, I snatched the plastic baggie which had been attached with sturdy string. It contained jewelry. I looked around to see if anyone was watching and after a quick inspection of the underside of the pier, I walked back to the Chevy.

I laid the pieces out on the front seat—two ladies' rings, one of gold and one of silver, a lovely antique silver chain necklace, three pairs of stud earrings, one set with blue stones, and a silver bracelet with an engraved medallion. I stared at the bracelet as my heart did flip-flops. Engraved on the medallion was the letter A. A for Annaline.

I almost laughed. A typical frugal Cajun, Dugas had murdered his lover but couldn't bear to throw away good jewelry.

Who knew what secret passions seethed here in the marsh? I debated what to do. Should I take the bag straight to the police and tell them where I found it? I didn't really want to do that.

Dugas had obviously been out here today checking his stash. I decided to put the jewelry back where

I'd found it and phone in an anonymous tip to the police. That way I could stay out of it. I didn't like carrying around a murdered woman's jewelry. I was feeling paranoid. What if I became a suspect? After all, I'd been alone the night of the murder and I'd been in the vicinity the next morning. No, an anonymous tip was best.

I carefully wiped off the jewelry with a windshield cloth, tucked the items back into the baggie, and retied it under the pier. I checked for footprints I had made but water had already seeped into the mud where I'd slipped. I thought of tire tracks, but on the white shell road-way, there weren't any.

I drove back to the city and from a pay phone called the police information number given in the newspaper. I was surprised when I got a recording and left a message telling them to search the underside of a certain old pier where a man named Dugas had placed a bag of jewelry.

As I drove across town to home I felt virtuous. I had practically cracked the case for the police! The newspaper would read, "The police, acting on an anonymous tip, today arrested..."

The next morning I hurried down to get the paper and searched it for any news about the Bayou Broussard murder, as the press was calling it. The only item about it reiterated the police's need for information and again asked that the public come forward.

Maybe, I thought, there's a lag between events and news. Maybe Dugas was being taken into cus-

tody this very moment. Maybe tomorrow I'll read about it . . . But I couldn't wait for tomorrow.

I put off the garden work and desk work and the other tasks I'd planned for my break and drove toward the gulf. Now that I knew Dugas was the killer, I had to make sure he got caught.

Would Alvin think it strange for me to show up a third day? I decided to tell him I was a teacher and invent a story about planning to bring my class out to birdwatch. Just scouting the neighborhood.

I made two stops for gas and cash, and it was almost noon when I got to Arceneaux's. I drove to the far end of the parking lot to see if Dugas's truck was there, expecting that it wouldn't be. It was.

I wondered why the police weren't all over this. They'd been given the murderer on a silver platter. I was pissed. I wondered if the voice mail had malfunctioned. Maybe no one had checked it? No, Louisiana was laid back but not that much. I had no idea why Dugas was still at large.

And there he was, perched on the bar stool, nursing a beer and his hatred for a woman who'd probably done nothing more than reject him. Tibo stood near the end of the bar.

This time when I walked in, Dugas turned to look at me and our eyes met. Something like a knowing flashed in his and I suddenly had a hot feeling in my belly. He seemed to know that I knew about him.

Tibo looked my way without speaking and I nodded.

When Alvin saw me, he regis-

tered surprise but covered it quickly.

"*Comment ça va?*" he asked. How goes it?

"*Ça va.*" was all I replied. It goes.

I decided to play the role I'd planned. I complimented Alvin on his fried crabs. I ordered a half dozen and began telling him about the school excursion.

"You shoulda axed me about it before," Alvin said, waving his dish-towel. "If you had axed me, I could a tol' you the best places to go. There's a road off Wildcat Bayou where . . ." And he regaled me with the best spots for birdwatching.

While I picked out the crabmeat, I kept an eye on Dugas, who never seemed to eat but drank one beer after another. He rarely spoke, though everyone who came in said hello. He'd nod or say nothing in reply.

The afternoon wore on and I was on my next to last crab when Dugas got up from the bar, leaving an empty bottle, and sidled over to me. I nodded in what I hoped was a friendly fashion.

He said in a throaty voice, "I got somethin' to tell you. Meet me out by the big oak down the road," motioning toward the gulf. And he lumbered out the side door to his truck.

The last crab didn't go down as well as the first five. It was bad enough to be in the same room with a killer. Now I had a rendezvous with him. Of course, I could just drive in the opposite direction back to the city.

As I finished the last crab—I wasn't about to leave one on ac-

count of a washed-up, woman-hating murderer—I decided to meet him.

He was older than I was, I reasoned, and slower. I was in shape. He was half drunk. I'd watch him and if it looked dicey, I'd drive away. Actually, I was curious as hell to know what he wanted to tell me.

I settled up with Alvin and had to ward off more information about where to go and what to see. I told him I'd be back for some final scouting. Tibo eyed me in an unfriendly way.

I continued on the road to the gulf and thought I knew which tree Dugas meant, a huge oak that leaned over the road about a mile from Arceneaux's.

When I reached the oak, I saw Dugas sitting in his old truck parked under the tree. He gestured for me to pull in next to him. I did, but didn't get out of the Chevy. I noticed then that the tree stood next to a rutted road that led to a clump of old oaks. Through the trees, a small house was visible. I also noticed that our meeting site was very isolated.

I stayed in my car and he ambled over. I kept the engine running and the doors locked. I rolled the window down halfway and did my best to look menacing. I felt silly when he said, "Set and stay awhile."

"What do you want to tell me?" I wondered if he knew I knew and wanted to kill me to shut me up.

But his body posture was relaxed, not like a man bent on murder—or maybe it was the beer.

Dugas looked at me with something like disbelief—that I'd want

to talk with the motor running and the window half open—but he said in a voice that sounded almost sober, "Saw you foolin' round my spot yesterday."

"You did?" I said before thinking. I'd seen no one around me at all.

He nodded. His certainty made me not want to deny it.

"How did you?"

"Me, I use these." He reached down and fingered a bigger pair of binoculars than mine which he wore slung on his side.

My heart sank. He did know. I shifted from park to drive and was about to jam out of there when he said, "Wait!"

I put my foot on the brake.

"I got more to say."

His body language reassured me somewhat. He didn't appear to have a gun or a knife stuck in his overalls.

"Okay."

"You messed wit' my bag of jury and you put it back. Why'd you do that?"

My answer, "Wasn't mine," sounded weak.

Now I understood why he hadn't been arrested. He'd seen me near the old pier and had gone back and gotten his "jury." He'd undoubtedly hidden it somewhere else.

To my surprise, he pulled the baggie with the "jury" out of his overall pocket and dangled it in front of me. Was the man mad?

"And who you think this jury belongs to?"

"To Annaline, of course. The *dead* Annaline," I revised. Would he go ballistic? I was scared, but my anger had kicked in.

Dugas got angry, too.

"What game you playin', man?" he asked, and then repeated, "What game you playin'?" He stamped his feet a few times like a Brahma bull.

"No game, man. You killed her!" I was a little out of control with anger at this idiot.

The idiot took a step back and his face went blank. Then he started to laugh. The laugh became a rough guffaw and his face turned red. The laughter sounded strange in someone so perpetually morose. His laughing was infectious, and I smiled in spite of the gut fear that still contracted my innards.

My guts were relaxing, though. It seemed pretty clear he wasn't going to cut my throat.

"You thought I quit her, den you," he said and laughed some more. I turned off the motor and got out of the car.

"Who says you didn't?"

"Me, I got an alibi, man. I was workin' a crab boat and slept out to Deep Lake that night. Wit' five men who seen me."

I said nothing. I was in a state of confusion and it must have shown on my face.

"Come wit' me to my place," said Dugas, motioning toward the road that led back to the trees. "I want to show you somethin'."

The spell was broken and I was no longer scared witless. I decided to follow him up the path. We could have driven but it was only a short walk. The front yard was strewn with old tools and dead appliances. Greens shot up from a scraggly vegetable garden. Dugas was proud of it and pointed it out to me.

"Growin' my own," he said. "Cain't afford to eat at Arceneaux's. He wants too much for that food."

"What about the beer?" I couldn't resist asking.

"Oh, I get that free for bringin' him the best crabs from Deep Lake."

"Wait a sec. You bring him crabs, he gives you beer, but you can't afford to buy his food?"

"That's the way of it."

I shook my head at this twisted economics.

"Most of what he has is crabs, anyways," said Dugas. "I don't eat crabs."

"You don't?" I asked, astounded. "Why not?"

"Me, I don't like 'em. Don't like them beady eyes. Devil eyes."

I decided not to comment.

We reached his house, a small jerry-built structure with a porch and a patched-up look, but with a homey feeling about it. On the porch was an old swing. A few rotting children's toys were scattered about the yard.

"You got kids?"

"They was hers. She took 'em when she run off."

"Who? Annaline?"

"You not too bright for a teacher. My wife. Angelique."

It was my turn for a red face.

Dugas saw it and said, "Come on, man. What I want to show you."

We stepped inside the tiny house. The living room was bare. I mean, not just sparsely furnished. There was nothing in it.

"You moving?"

Dugas made his rough laugh again.

"She took it all when she left."

"How'd that happen?"

Dugas motioned me to a rickety table and chair on the porch and got two beers from an old fridge. This was stuff Angelique apparently hadn't wanted. He pulled up a wooden stool and we sat outside. I noticed the wind blew strongly and was grateful because it pushed away the mosquitoes, which were not bad yet but beginning to gear up for summer. Heavy clouds had formed over the gulf and it looked like a storm might be blowing in.

"She said she's sicka me. Sicka marsh life. She says she's leavin' and goin' to live in the city. I say fine. She says she's leavin' in the mornin'. So while she's sleepin' I sneak into her jury box and take the jury."

"You stole her jewelry?"

"Not stole. I was the one give it to her." He swigged his beer.

"Then it was hers."

"To hell it was."

"Go on."

"So in the mornin' I go out early to bait my lines and when I come back, she says she decided not to leave. I should go on the crab boat like always. I go out for two days and when I come back, the Dodge and everything's gone. Angelique and everything. She musta put it all inna trailer, is my guess."

"Except the jewelry."

"Yeah, I got the jury."

"Well, that's too bad she left," I said with a show of sympathy. "So you hid the jewelry where you knew she wouldn't find it."

"That's right. I left it there in case she come back."

"Too bad you couldn't work things out."

"There was one reason we never coulda worked things out."

"What's that?" I pulled on my beer.

"Annaline."

I sighed. "So you were, you know ..."

"Hell, man. I was standing in line. I wanted her so bad. I knew what she was, but I ... had to have her."

"She was that good, huh?"

"She was the devil."

I started to protest his judgmental double standard but suddenly I felt tired. I was tired of these passions, of the marsh, and the unruliness of life here. In the shifting regions of this waterworld, with the land a poor relation battered by tides and storms, how could you hold onto anything for long? I thought I understood how Angelique must have felt, why she left. Why do city folk romanticize the country, I wondered? Devil eyes, for crying out loud.

"You have any idea who killed her?" I asked Dugas.

He stared out at the clouds and said, "Maybe." And that was all he said.

I apologized to Dugas for suspecting him and told him I was just a teacher out of his depth and I was going back to the city to make lesson plans and mind my own business.

He responded by pulling out two more beers—he seemed to have an endless supply. We sat around in a lazy beer-induced haze and Dugas told me about his childhood in the

marsh. He had grown up not far away on another *chenier*—the English word was “ridge”—a strip of land anchored by oak trees. The small Cajun communities of the ridges had been extremely isolated then, with not much contact from outside. Dugas had learned to fish and crab and trap and herd the scrappy marsh cattle. Then the oil companies came and life changed. New roads, different folks, spoiled waters, tourists.

Dugas talked and I listened. Themes emerged—a life lived close to the land, the joys of a good catch, the beauty and teeming variety of the marsh, the loneliness, and the ever-present menace of accidents, storms, and high water. A place where subsistence and endurance were not just long words misspelled in an essay. My city life held little of this elemental quality, smothered as it was in convenience.

Finally Dugas nodded toward the darkening sky and said, “Weather’s changin’. You best be on your way.”

I finished my beer and took a leak inside—he did have indoor plumbing—and felt gusts shake the little structure.

Standing in his yard, his beard swirling in the wind like the moss on an oak, Dugas waved goodbye and said, “Don’t be stickin’ your feet in bad water.”

I assured him my feet would walk only on lawns and sidewalks from now on.

As I headed down the lane to the Chevy, the wind blew fiercely and I had to struggle against it. Overhead the skies had turned leaden,

and a strange, sickly yellow glow marked the place where the sun had been. Lightning flashed on the horizon and I heard a crescendo of thunder. For the last two days, I had been too preoccupied to pay attention to the weather. This didn’t look good, and suddenly I was in a hurry to get going. Spring storms could come up suddenly, bringing high winds, torrential rain, and tornadoes.

When I was almost to my car, the rain came in a downpour and I dove for the interior. The rain fell in sheets faster than my windshield wipers could wave it away and in the gathering darkness, I could barely see the road. A light up ahead beckoned and I realized I was back at Arceneaux’s. I pulled into the parking lot. At least I could get a cup of coffee to fortify myself for the drive home.

I ran from the car to the front door, the wind whipping the rain into stinging pellets. Alvin wasn’t happy to see me.

“What you doin’ here, boy? Storm’s comin’ in.”

“I noticed. Can I get a cup of coffee?” There was nobody else in the restaurant. It was dinnertime but the storm had evidently driven off the customers.

He sighed. “Awright. Want some gumbo?”

I accepted. It was a long drive back and I had drunk too much beer. As I ate, the room grew darker and wind snapped at the old building in strong gusts.

“Gettin’ bad,” said Alvin. “I’m gonna close.” He went behind the bar and began tidying up. The

phone rang. He had a brief conversation and hung up. He came over to me. I had just finished my coffee and was pulling out bills to pay him.

"You stranded, boy."

"What?"

"That was Lucy. We live a mile that way." He pointed the way I was headed. "She says the road's flooded at Vermilion Creek. Wanted me to tell anybody in here not to go that way."

"How else can I go?"

"Nowhere, boy. Ain't but one road."

I sat there digesting this information. Sleeping in the car didn't sound so good.

"Know anywhere I can spend the night?"

"Heck, you can stay right here. We got us a Rest Room round back." He laughed. "That's what we call it—the Rest Room. Probly the only restroom in America that's exactly what it says. Lucy and I use it when we're workin' and one a us wants to take a nap. We got us a bed, blankets, pillows, even a head. Somebody gets too wasted to drive, he sleeps it off in the Rest Room. Lucy charges him for havin' to wash the sheets and such."

It didn't sound appealing but I didn't have much choice. I looked outside where trees bent to their waists in the wind and rain lashed the land. Waves of water washed down the highway.

"What about you?"

"Won't get any trouble. I live this side of Vermilion Creek."

"But the road?"

"Nah. Somethin' happen, I just

walk home." Evidently Alvin was used to this. He pointed to his rubber boots. "I come prepared," he added.

"Can I help you close up?"

"Thanks. You can stack those glasses in the tray and wipe off the tables." He handed me a rag.

I set to work while he scrubbed the bar and washed the remaining glasses.

"You out scoutin' this afternoon?" Alvin asked, clinking glasses.

"Sort of. I went out to Dugas's place. He invited me."

"He did?" Alvin said with surprise. "Not much of a place."

"It's okay."

"Man's a mess. Cain't keep his women."

"He's still pretty shook up over Annaline."

At the sound of her name, the energy in the room shifted. I should have known better than to introduce a loaded subject.

"That *cochon!*" said Alvin with unexpected vehemence. I didn't know why he had called Dugas a pig.

Since I had stumbled into the subject, I decided to ask something I wanted to know.

"Alvin, what was Annaline like?"

Alvin put the last glass aside and emptied the dishwasher. He came over to where I was cleaning tables and looked at me directly.

"You never seen such a woman, boy." His face had softened and clouded over and I was afraid for a moment he would cry. "*Jolie comme une petite poupée.*" Pretty as a doll.

"Seems she was . . . loved."

"Loved?" He recovered himself a

bit. "Heck, I don't know if I'd call it that. Let's just say she had a face like an angel and a body like a devil. All teasin' and laughin' one minute and poutin' the next. Kept sayin' she was leavin' this stinkin' marsh."

I thought it ironic that the marsh had become her deathbed.

"Who could have killed her?" I asked softly.

Alvin's eyes grew dark again.

"Why you care, teacher? This part a your scoutin'?" The way he snapped out the words made me want to withdraw the question.

"Just curious. Thought you local people might have an idea."

"Nobuddy here could have kilt our angel. Somebuddy come from the city, somebuddy like you mebbe, sees our *jolie blonde* walkin' down the road and goes nuts."

I had an uneasy feeling.

"Well, maybe. But you know what they say. People usually get killed by their closest friends or relatives."

"Well, I wasn't one a them."

"You knew her pretty well, though, didn't you?"

"What you mean by that?" Alvin asked angrily. He pushed a few chairs up to their tables with loud, scraping sounds.

"Nothing, Alvin. Sorry I brought it up. Forget it."

I had finished cleaning the tables and asked Alvin to show me the Rest Room. First I retrieved a book from the Chevy and locked the car for the night, then followed him down a hallway. We turned into a small added-on room. There was just enough space for a single

bed. A little alcove housed the toilet and a small sink. It appeared neat enough. It would do.

"No TV," said Alvin, chuckling, his dark mood gone.

"No problem."

We had entered the Rest Room from the restaurant and Alvin said he would lock this door when he left. The Rest Room had an outside door that could be locked from within. Alvin said he'd be back early in the morning.

"Sweet dreams," he said, as he closed the inside door. I heard the click as he locked it, then heard other doors closing and finally heard his car drive away.

The Rest Room had no windows, but I could hear the storm was subsiding and the wind had grown calmer. The rain came in a steady beat without its former fury.

I stripped down to my underwear, opened up the bedsheets, which smelled like laundry soap, and got in. The bed was a few inches too short for me and I had to stick my feet through the spaces in the bedframe. The air in the room was a bit stuffy but pleasantly warm. I'd kept a book in the car on Louisiana marsh birds so I whiled away some time reading up on egrets and herons and spoonbills. Finally, the adrenaline of this emotion-filled day gave way to exhaustion. I pulled the sheets up around my neck and fell into slumber.

Sometime in the night something woke me. I came awake wondering where I was. The rain had stopped and the only sound was water dripping off the roof.

I heard the lock click as some-

one opened the outside door with a key. I jumped upright in bed and froze. Someone shone a flashlight in my eyes and said, "Get up!"

When the flashlight lowered, I saw it was Alvin—with a rifle pointed at me.

"What . . ."

"Get up," he said again. "Put your clothes on." The flashlight panned the room but the rifle stayed put.

I edged out of bed and pulled on my shirt and pants.

"Shoes, too," the voice said, sounding not like the friendly proprietor of Arceneaux's but lower, harsher.

"Take everything," Alvin commanded.

"What's going on, Alvin?" I muttered. My answer was the barrel of the rifle pressing into my back.

I did what he asked.

When I was dressed, he said, "Car keys. Put 'em on the bed."

I extracted them from my pants pocket and placed them on the bed. He put the flashlight down, took the keys and put them in his pocket, then picked up the light and pointed it to the door.

"Let's get goin'."

"Where, Alvin? I don't need any more scouting."

"Shut up."

We headed down a soggy path toward the marsh. A moon was trying to rise and gleamed cool and misty after the recent onslaught of weather.

I stayed on the path, mostly, with Alvin following close behind. A few times when I veered off, unable to see where it led, Alvin would say, "Not that way. Stay left." He obvi-

ously knew this place well. I noticed more water on all sides as we moved farther into the marsh. If I hadn't been terrified already, I would have worried about gators and water moccasins. All I could think of was the rifle.

I knew it wouldn't do me any good to run. These marsh Cajuns were crack shots. I was pretty sure Alvin meant to kill me. Maybe I could escape into the dark. In the marsh? My chances didn't seem good.

We were almost to the end of the land, the point where this earth, deposited over millennia by the gulf's wave action, gave way to marshy goo, then open water. A pier stretched out over the water.

Panic was at the edge of my mind. I heard my daddy saying after a fight at school, "Use your mouth, son, not your fists." At first I thought he meant I should bite my tormenter, but he explained. "Talk, son. Use your brain. Figure out what works."

I turned and said to Alvin, "You did love her like crazy, didn't you. You loved Annaline."

He stopped there, not speaking.

Finally he said, "Love, I don't know . . ."

"Why'd you kill her, Alvin?"

"Shut up."

"Was it the other men, all the other men?"

"Nah. I knew she was a whore." His voice and anger rose. "She . . ." His voice broke. "She said I didn't count for nothin', that she was leavin', that she'd find ten more better than me."

I was silent.

"Turns out she was tellin' every-

body that," he added in a cynical voice.

"How'd you know?"

"She tol' Dugas the same damn thing. He fixed her, though."

"How?"

"He sneaked over to her house and broke a few winders, poked her tires, that kinda thing. She was sure mad about that."

So that was what Dugas meant when he said he "got her good." Vindictiveness and vandalism, not murder.

"How'd you end up killing her, Alvin?" I didn't know what I hoped to gain except a few more moments of life, but strangely, some place in my mind still wanted to know.

"I was right to haul you out here," was all he said in a flat voice. "Your spyin' is over."

"I told you, I'm a teacher. Not a spy, not a cop." I was trembling from cold and fear. The night air on the marsh after the rain was chilly and I was glad I had a jacket. A mist was rising over the marsh. I wondered if this would help my chances.

"Now you gonna be crab bait, cop."

I pictured in my mind what would happen next. He'd make me walk to the end of the pier. He'd shoot me. I'd fall into the deep water. I'd hope he was a good shot because soon the crabs would find me. . . . I had feasted on them, and now they would feast on me—the ultimate recycling.

"Someone will hear the shot."

"Not likely and so what? We mind our own business out here."

"My body'll wash up like Annaline's did."

"We didn't figure that right. Thought she'd end up farther out."

"Who's 'we,' Alvin?"

Alvin stopped.

"Jusso you know. I didn't kill Annaline."

I wished I could have seen his expression in the dark.

"But . . ." I had started to ask him why he was about to kill me when I remembered his faded, hard-working wife. How had she stood knowing Annaline was servicing every man in the place while she slaved away in the kitchen fixing their food and being dutiful? Had she slipped rat poison in Annaline's gumbo that night?

"Did . . . Lucy?"

His silence told me I was right. He said, "Out on the pier," and lifted the rifle.

As I stepped onto the pier and began to pray, I heard a shot. Alvin's body lurched and flipped in the air before slumping to the ground. The rifle in his hand fell on the ground at his side.

I stood on the pier in shock, unable to comprehend what had happened. At first I thought I was shot. Then a figure emerged from the mist. It was Dugas.

"Dugas!" I shouted, running toward him. He went over to where Alvin lay, kicked the rifle away from him, picked it up, and shouldered it.

Alvin was still breathing. It looked like Dugas had caught him in the leg.

"Thank God!" I said. "He was gonna . . ."

"Yeah."

"How'd you know?"

"Heard Vermilion Creek was flooded and knew you wasn't goin' nowhere. I figured he'd put you in the Rest Room. I sneaked over here and hid out in a duck blind till I heard him comin'."

"You followed us through the marsh?"

"Yeah. Knew he'd take you out to the pier."

"How'd you know?"

"Jus' did."

"What now?"

"I'm gonna fix his leg so he don't bleed to death. I want him to fry for what he done to Annaline."

I didn't know what to say. Should I tell him what I knew? That Lucy was the murderer and Alvin her accomplice? I decided to hold my tongue.

Dugas took off his T-shirt and wrapped Alvin's leg in it, and I covered him with my jacket. It gave me a perverse satisfaction to help the man who'd almost killed me. Dugas and I walked back through the marsh, and I rode with him to the pay phone at the gas station where he called the sheriff.

By the time the sheriff and his men had hauled Alvin out of the marsh and taken him off to the hospital and were done with us, it was daybreak. Bone-weary, I followed Dugas in the Chevy back to his house. I slumped on the porch in a chair and he brought me a beer. We sipped our beers and watched the sun come up. The sun's rays streamed through the mist, burning it off and dispelling night terrors. The air was cool and everything smelled fresh.

"What made you think it was Alvin?" I asked.

"Just knowed. Knowed what he's like. He was crazy mad for Annaline. Worse than me." He was silent for a while, then continued.

"I was sittin' down there at the bar all a time, waitin' to see some-thin', hear somethin' that would trip him up. You come in and we thought you was either a cop or a newspaper reporter."

"You looked sad, though, like you were grief stricken," I said to him. "Guess you're an actor."

"Wasn't no act, man. What I said to you, that she deserved it, I was wrong. She didn't deserve that."

I was surprised he remembered.

We finished our beers and Dugas announced he was going out to bait his lines. I said goodbye.

I was going home.

Back in the city, with the comforting feel of asphalt under my feet and the strengthening sun raising moisture from tidy lawns bordered by rose gardens, I unlocked the door of my apartment and slumped on the couch.

I'd discovered the murderer after all and hadn't told the sheriff or Dugas. Maybe it would come out when they questioned Alvin. How far would he go to protect his wife?

So why hadn't I told them about Lucy? I hated the idea of Lucy in prison. That mild-mannered, hard-working lady must have been driven half mad to commit such a crime of passion. Aside from that, she made the best fried crabs and shrimp gumbo in the state. Anybody who could cook like that deserved a break. □

FICTION

MEDICINE WATER

David Edgerley Gates



Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/02

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Placido Geist had come to Santa Fe for a hanging. The man being hanged was named Joseph Musket but was generally known as Navajo Joe, a horse thief and murderer wanted in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles for various crimes against persons and property.

He and two others had drygulched a posse in mounted pursuit near Coldwater Creek in the Texas high plains, leaving two men dead and the rest afoot in the Rita Blanca grasslands, their horses having been driven off. Navajo Joe Musket escaped west, across the state line into New Mexico, where it was his later misfortune to fall afoul of the law by shooting an unarmed man in a dispute over cards. The killing took place in the town of Espanola, a divided jurisdiction overlapping two counties. Joe rode north on a stolen horse, up the banks of the Chama, and a Rio Arriba undersheriff named Benny Salvador went after him, one man with a remount, riding hard.

Salvador caught up with Navajo Joe in Medanales a day later, but the outlaw didn't surrender without a fight. The two men stood up to one another in the dusty village square, twenty feet apart, both of them still sitting on their horses. Joe pulled his saddle gun, and the deputy drew his single-action .44, and according to the witnesses, three shots were exchanged. Navajo Joe shot the deputy's horse out from under him, and as the horse buckled at the knees, Salvador put two bullets in Joe Musket's upper body, one through the right lung and the second shattering his collarbone. The heavy slugs toppled Navajo Joe into the street, but Salvador stepped clear of his horse as it collapsed, keeping his feet, so he was still standing, holding a smoking gun in one hand and the reins of the dead horse in the other, as Navajo Joe hit the ground. This story was already folklore.

Deputy Sheriff Salvador brought Musket in alive for trial, although septic infection was filling the outlaw's lung with fluid. Santa Fe and Rio Arriba counties disputed custody, but there was little time if Navajo Joe weren't to cheat the hangman. Rio Arriba surrendered him to Santa Fe. He was tried quickly, convicted, and an early execution date set. He was delivered to the New Mexico state penitentiary, where a hood and a leather-lined noose were being readied for him.

Placido Geist would have preferred to see Navajo Joe hang in Texas for murders done there, since he'd known the men who'd been killed at Coldwater Creek, but he was willing to settle for New Mexico justice.

The state pen was on the outskirts of Santa Fe, southwest of the plaza, next to the railroad spur that came up from the transcontinental stop at Lamy, and just across the Los Cerrillos road from a school for the deaf, founded a few years before. A slaughterhouse for cattle and sheep stood on the other side of the tracks from the prison, and even in the early morning darkness, an hour before sunrise, the smell of blood and uncured hides was thick in the air.

Santa Fe style was adobe blocks, faced in stucco, but the prison was

built of red brick, blackening with age. A set of steel-clad doors, wide enough to admit a wagon and a team of horses, hinged inward, opening directly onto the execution yard.

The scaffold was a permanent structure, framed up in the late eighteen hundreds, post and beam, pegged with heavy dowels. There was no attempt to camouflage its purpose, and the cells on the north side of the prison were afforded a clear view. The general public, however, was not admitted. Placido Geist took his place with the other invited witnesses, among them Deputy Salvador. He was chilly in the shadow of the walls, although dawn was silvering the sky. It would heat up quickly after day-break, a warmth Joe Musket would never know, Placido Geist reflected, but he felt no pity, only a dull fatigue.

The condemned man was brought out on a board, too weak to walk, and carried up the thirteen steps to the platform. Two guard bulls held him erect as the warden read the sentence, the priest stepped forward to murmur some words of cold comfort, and the hangman slipped the hood over Navajo Joe's head and snugged the noose around his neck. A sandbag was tied to his ankles.

The other men moved back, Navajo Joe sagged heavily against the knotted rope, and the drop was released. Navajo Joe fell into empty air, the weight on his bound legs stretching him straight.

The rope hummed briefly.

Morning sunlight broke over the prison walls.

"A freight office," Deputy Salvador said.

Placido Geist nodded.

"No railway line runs that far north of Amarillo."

Placido Geist nodded again. "Wells Fargo," he said.

"These other two men you're after, they haven't committed a crime in New Mexico, or not one we know of."

"They will."

The deputy considered that.

"They ambushed a posse in Texas," Placido Geist said. "Men foolish enough to shoot at the law will do it again."

Salvador smiled. "They haven't shot at me," he said.

"Joseph Musket did."

Salvador leaned back in his chair, rolling a cigarette to give him time to study the old bounty hunter. He did so without offense, thoughtfully trying to judge the man's character. He struck a sulphur match on the heel of his boot and let the flare die down before he put it to his smoke.

Placido Geist waited him out.

Salvador blew out the match and rocked forward again, the legs of the chair scraping on the plank floor. The cantina was clean and modest, not a place for low sorts. Salvador had suggested it when Placido Geist offered to buy him a drink. The deputy shook his head. "Joseph Musket shot

a harmless drunk," he said. "And he did it in *my* town. I took offense at it. When he threw down on me, I answered in kind." Salvador shrugged. "It comes with the badge. But you're asking for something else. You want me to hunt men for money. Wells Fargo has a price on their heads."

"A thousand dollars apiece," Placido Geist told him.

The deputy tried to look unimpressed, but a reward that size was serious. "If they split up with Navajo Joe, there's no telling where they've got to by now," he said.

"One of them's a cousin of Musket's, a Navajo named Emerson Zah," Placido Geist said. "The other one's a Chinaman."

Chinese contract labor had built the railroads and worked the gold mines. This was the first time Salvador had heard of a Chinaman turning to armed robbery.

"I'm thinking an Indian might go to ground unnoticed, but a Chinaman would be remarked on," Placido Geist said.

"They'll have vanished," the deputy said. "Up on the big reservation, if I don't miss my guess." He meant the Navajo Reservation, which spread out from Four Corners, much of it in Arizona and New Mexico, but partly in southern Colorado and Utah. It was bigger than West Texas, a featureless landscape of scrub and escarpment to the uninitiated.

Placido Geist agreed to this objection, but he knew he had him. Salvador was jiggling in the traces, but he'd already taken the bit between his teeth.

They rode north, up the Rio Grande valley. It was late spring, and there were wildfires in the Jemez. By day, smoke lay on the ridges, heavy in the still air. At night, you could see a hot glow in the sky as the crowns of the trees kindled and caught light. It had been a dry winter, Salvador told him, and the seasonal rains wouldn't start until July. The underbrush on the mountainsides was like ready tinder, waiting only the spark.

They had two stops to make in Espanola, one of an official nature, one personal business. First they paid a visit to the sheriff, who was reluctant to let his deputy go off on some wild goose chase that might take him away for weeks, but Salvador was already enough of a celebrity in Rio Arriba county that he could pretty much call the shots. The sheriff, a man named Montaño, wrote it up as leave, with a provision that the arrests, if any were made, go on Rio Arriba's books, which meant Montaño got the credit, but Salvador would be reimbursed per diem expenses. The deputy was perfectly happy with this arrangement.

Then they went to explain themselves to Salvador's wife.

Apparently the deputy hadn't been married long, although it was obvious Teresa Salvador was some months' pregnant. Placido Geist was struck by the formality with which they greeted one another, a sort of protective mantle they each wore, as if their feelings were too strong, or perhaps too fragile, to admit of conduct less correct. They still seemed to be courting, and the old man found their awkwardness charming.

Teresa had invited him in with her head ducked, but Placido Geist wasn't fooled. This was a woman with strength, which she chose not to display out of respect for her husband, not wishing to humiliate him in front of a stranger. The little *casita* was spotlessly clean; the simple supper she prepared for them was straightforward and wholesome. The table talk was mild, not touching on the bounty hunter's business. They spoke in Spanish, the *norteño* accent more liquid and Castilian than the harsh Texas border patois Placido Geist was used to hearing. It put him in mind of Moorish gardens, air scented with oranges.

He excused himself after the meal and stepped outside. The little adobe had been built in the shade of the big cottonwoods that grew along the river. It was dusk, and a cloud of bats flickered beneath the trees, squeaking and darting, snatching at the insects that rose off the surface of the water as it cooled. Placido Geist found it a restful place. He lit a cheroot.

It was a full ten minutes before the deputy joined him, rolling a cigarette. No voices had been raised, not that Placido Geist had heard, but Benny Salvador looked guilty. "She doesn't care for it," he told the bounty hunter.

"I don't blame her," Placido Geist said.

They were speaking English now, as they had in the cantina. Spanish for the hearth, English for this meaner bargaining.

"She's making up a bed for you," Salvador said.

Placido Geist shouldn't have been surprised, but he felt it was an imposition. "I can stay in town," he said.

Salvador smiled. "Don't add insult to injury," he said.

A thousand dollars was a lot for a young couple starting a family, Placido Geist knew. He'd taken advantage of them.

The so-called Chama Highway ran alongside the south bank of the Rio Chama, angling northwest as far as the village of Abiquiú, and then turning directly north, toward the Colorado border. It was an unmetalled road, poorly graded, the packed earth surface corrugated by run-off. The small towns north of Santa Fe were serviced by jitney, by the through stage lines to Alamosa and Trinidad, and by mule skinnners, independent freight haulers.

There was no railroad north of Santa Fe. Absent the use of a motor vehicle, a luxury few could afford, the most practical means of travel was horseback. Deputy Sheriff Salvador and Placido Geist each took two mounts, any extra gear packed on the second horse, and set off up the Chama road.

Placido Geist had parted with Teresa Salvador on what he hoped was a friendly note, thanking her for her hospitality, but not exaggerating his appreciation.

"If there's a risk to either of you, *viejo*, bring them back head-down over a saddle," she told him briskly.

This sudden frankness was a side to her he hadn't seen.

She stood for a moment at Salvador's stirrup, looking up at him, her hand resting lightly on the cantle. They seemed to be inhaling each other's presence. Benny removed his hat then, an oddly old-fashioned gesture, and bent to brush his lips against her hair. She stepped back. Benny straightened and settled his hat over his eyes again, and touched the spurs to his horse.

The first day's ride, some forty miles, took them upriver to where the road forked north, and then they rode west, across the Pedregal, to spend a night in Arroyo del Agua. The next day they climbed, crossing the Continental Divide. In the canyons, the red rock took on fantastical shapes. They came down into the badlands on the far side of the watershed, in Jicarilla Apache country. As long as the Indians spoke Spanish, there was little difficulty, and Placido Geist still felt confident of his skills, the Apache familiar enough. But another two days' ride brought them to the San Juan. Once across it, they were on Navajo land, and he noticed a subtle alteration. Not in the country itself, which seemed much the same, but in the people.

Placido Geist had no knowledge of the Navajo, and both their small courtesies and their occasional prickliness took him off guard. He let Salvador handle the formalities, realizing he was out of his depth.

They managed a hotel room and a hot bath in Farmington, a town of some size, big enough to boast public transportation in the form of horse-drawn trolleys. The day after, they pushed on into the reservation itself, riding up the San Juan to Shiprock, where they planned to consult with the tribal police.

The mountain snuck up on him, since he wasn't looking for it. They were horseback, the land folding and opening at a slow pace. It was there on the horizon, rising by degrees, part of the background until it stood by itself, a huge lava uplift, or a jagged thumb punching up through the earth's crust. It looked like canvas, of course, in silhouette, under sail in the desert wind. The rocks were backlit by the setting sun, caught against the skyline like a dragon's wings, frozen in the light.

Salvador noticed his bemused look. "Shiprock," he said. "Navajo call this The Land of The People. It's where First Man, the Navajo Adam, sprang from the earth."

It seemed a desolate countryside. "Not the Garden of Eden, to my way of thinking," Placido Geist observed.

Salvador gave him a sly glance. "Up in Utah, the Mormons named their kingdom Deseret," he commented. "They found a place for the Chosen."

Placido Geist stared at the mountain. "But the Latter-day Saints had been driven out into the wilderness," he reminded the younger man, without rebuke. "And the place of their choosing has become a fortress against their enemies. This seems somehow more, oh, appropriate."

Salvador nodded, abashed.

"Excuse me," Placido Geist said. "I didn't mean you any disrespect. Really." He was genuinely upset that he might have sounded scornful of Salvador's remark.

For his part, the deputy was at a loss as to why the bounty hunter seemed suddenly so solicitous, almost parental. It was unsettling. Salvador had taken Placido Geist to be unforgiving, elemental, like the looming shape of the mountain.

The interview at the tribal police barracks went badly, certainly not as well as either of them had hoped. The duty officer, an acting sergeant named Begay, seemed to begrudge them what little information he had, and in fact, since Salvador had neither warrants nor jurisdiction and was acting as a private citizen, Begay was under no obligation to provide them with any assistance at all. Salvador was careful not to lose patience with him, however, and eventually negotiated a quid pro quo. In the event he took Musket's cousin into custody, Salvador agreed to deliver him to the Navajo police and let a tribal court decide whether or not to remand him to Texas. This was fair enough, since Texas law was notoriously rope-happy, in particular regarding Indians or Negroes for whom presumption of innocence and the rules of evidence were often absent. As for the Chinaman, Begay was somewhat at a loss. If apprehended, he was entitled to whatever protection Begay could afford him, but not being Navajo, he had no special claim on Begay's goodwill. Begay appeared to wonder if the description of this man were in error. The idea of a Chinese desperado on the prowl was at odds with his preconceptions.

"Wei Chiu," Placido Geist told Salvador, outside at the hitching post. Way Chew, he pronounced it. He dug the handbill out of his saddlebag.

Benny looked at the wanted poster. The crude drawing could have been any generic Chinese.

Placido Geist read his thoughts. "We're not after one man among thousands," he said. "If this were California, it would be hopeless, but hiding with Indians, he'll stand out, and we'll cut sign, sooner or later."

"Provided he's here at all."

Placido Geist shrugged. "If he's not, he's not," he said. "If he is, a stranger provokes comment. We will." He looked at the deputy. "They'll know we're coming before we get there."

Salvador's decision to begin with upper San Juan county, one of the more remote reaches of the enormous reservation, wasn't arbitrary. Navajo clans were matrilineal, as he understood it.

Not that he pretended to know the culture that well, he told Placido Geist. It was complicated to an outsider, incest taboos and the like, although so self-evident to the Navajo as not to require explanation. In any event, Musket's aunt, an Emily Zah, was listed as next of kin, and since Musket's cousin, the man they were after, was Emerson Zah, it seemed like a good place to start. Salvador had confirmed with Acting Sergeant

Begay that the Zah outfit ran sheep south of Horse Mesa, a full day's ride, just this side of the Arizona border.

They reprovisioned, stabled the horses, and took advantage of a hot meal and decent beds at a boarding house run by a widower named Moise, who'd come west hoping to sell an off-brand of muscular fundamentalist gospel to the Indians and had the hard-luck countenance of a whiskey drummer in a dry town. Moise kept a good table, though, and the only souvenir of his former enthusiasm was a Bible on the nightstand in every room. Placido Geist was moved to read a little before turning in. He chose the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians, "... walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called."

They set out early the next morning, the sun still behind a hogback that humped up to the east. The country was craggy and rumped, cut by arroyos, dry this time of year before the rainy season, and they angled west by south, down a wash where the footing was easier on the horses, in preference to the broken ground. But the wash petered out as the elevation rose, and they crossed the stony shoulders that edged up against Shiprock itself. They circled the base of the mountain to the west, putting it between them and the rising sun. As the sun climbed higher, the shadow of the mountain foreshortened before them, as if Shiprock were gathering up its skirts.

By eight thirty, the day was making up cloudless and still, and the sun at their backs was already burning into their shoulderblades. In another couple of hours, the heat would be truly punishing. They hoped to have made Sand Spring by then, a chance to rest the horses and revive their own energies. There was water at Sand Spring, Salvador had it on good report, but he knew better than to depend on word of mouth. They carried water for themselves and their mounts, true. Benny knew it wouldn't be enough if they lost their bearings in this hard country, but he figured the old bounty hunter was better equipped than he was to survive the pitiless environment. Placido Geist gave off a flavor of ruthless competence, almost a scent. He was a dangerous man, Salvador suddenly realized, because he understood dangerous necessities.

The deputy wasn't a talker, to Placido Geist's relief, not the sort of saddle companion who felt he had to fill empty space with conversation. He wasn't close with information, and often solicited the older man's suggestions, acting on them when he agreed, and open to persuasion when he didn't, but he kept his thoughts to himself if they weren't pertinent. Placido Geist had heard the younger man came recommended by Elfego Baca, the legendary New Mexico peace officer *el Gato*, who was said to have survived an attack by rowdy Texas cowpunchers holed up in an adobe that took a few thousand bullets in the space of two days, after he'd arrested one of the cowboys and refused to give him up. Salvador was of the same temper, apparently, stubborn in pursuit and certainly nerveless, if there were any truth to the reports of the shoot-out in Medanales. He

had the gravity of someone older, either bred or acquired, and none of the stiff defensiveness of youth, the assumed starch of an untried man.

Professionally, at least. Placido Geist recalled the deputy's clumsiness with his wife and smiled inwardly. It wasn't condescension, or superiority, more a sad acknowledgement of his own history.

Sand Spring had water, and they let the horses drink, but not too much. Unlike cattle, horses could be as foolish as men and drink themselves stupid. A bloated horse with the blind staggers was no better than a horse dying of thirst, and a rider whose horse collapsed would die soon after.

They mounted up again and moved on. It wasn't yet noon, and they'd made good time. They figured to try for the trading post at Spanish Wells, another few hours distant. By then, animals and men alike would be grateful for shade and the prospect of waiting out the worst of the afternoon's heat. They could travel at dusk, the sun behind the mountains to the west.

He was no more a Chinaman than your Aunt Sally, of course, but to round-eyes they all looked alike. It was one of a few things he shared with the Indians of the Colorado plateau, not least the possibility of a common ancestry. Anthropologists suggested that nomads had crossed a land bridge over the Bering Strait during the last ice age, following game trails, to settle the North American continent as the glaciers retreated. He didn't dispute this. Certainly their facial characteristics were similar, and there were other coincidences, social and religious practices, he couldn't ignore, but he admitted to himself these could be no more than coincidence. He wasn't a scholar, and the evidence was anecdotal.

He was Buryat, from the plains of central Siberia, north of Lake Baikal, a Mongol, push come to shove, at least in the eyes of the czars, who had struggled with the Han Chinese for control over that sea of grass cradled by mountains, terrain rich in minerals and pony herds, the native peoples counting their wealth in livestock. Wei Chiu was an alias, an identity borrowed from the hated Han conquerors. Like the Spanish, who brought their language and their faith to the pueblos with torture and slavery and were supplanted by the exuberant rapacity of the Anglos, the Han had coveted the high steppes only to lose them in turn to the Russians, worse masters still. They garrisoned the Far East with political exiles and *zeks*, men doing penance for nameless crimes, who established Slavic hegemony using ruthless brutality, punishing local reluctance with public mutilation, branding, and executions noted for their prolonged agonies.

It was easy enough to pass for Chinese, he found, in this new country, America, where race was a signature, your fate written on your forehead. Another thing he could claim in common with the Navajo. His given name was Jamuga, and he was the son of a khan among his own people. Here he was a fugitive, a hunted man, but this wasn't a great change. He'd killed a Russian, one of the czar's officers. It made no difference that it

had been a duel and the man an insult to his own kind. He'd put a bullet in the fool's teeth at thirty yards, with a pistol, from the saddle. A lucky hit, perhaps, but unlucky in the event. The man's seconds named it murder, and he fled to Harbin. He was smuggled to the coast. He took ship in Port Arthur, an American sealer headed for the Pribilof Islands.

Had he known his children would be crucified and burnt alive, his wife and mother raped and then disemboweled, his father emasculated and impaled, he would have suffered in their place, but this was knowledge he was spared. He clubbed seals on the ice, thinking of the Romanovs, and skinned them, their furs a fortune. When they docked in San Francisco some months later, he was awarded a crewman's share and a mate's bonus, having been promoted from the ranks of able seamen. The other sailors squandered their money in the whorehouses of the Barbary Coast. He used his time to find Russians off the merchantmen and naval vessels docked alongside the Embarcadero and kill them. Among the Buryat, a blood feud was an obligation, and the instrument of reprisal only God's soldier, but he enjoyed it.

Spanish Wells was abandoned, the adobe walls still standing but the roof fallen in. The well itself was maintained, the stone coping freshly dressed, so herdsmen and others used it in their passage, but the trading post had been allowed to disintegrate into its component parts. Curiously, there were still tins and dry goods left on the shelves inside, covered with dust, the shelves themselves precarious. Placido Geist thought it odd the trade goods hadn't been looted.

Benny Salvador shook his head. "Not if somebody died in the building," he said. "The storekeeper, his wife. It doesn't matter. Navajo are funny about the dead."

"Superstitious?"

Salvador shrugged. "One man's religion is another man's superstition," he remarked. "You and I were raised in the one true church, or so we've been told. Do either of us believe the blood of Christ is truly present in the wine?" He smiled. "I'm not mocking the sacrament. Just the pretense."

"You feel that faith is no more than pretense?"

Salvador appeared to study on it. "I'd say that faith is something agreed upon," he answered thoughtfully. "If a statue of the Virgin weeps tears and enough people are there see it, is that any less of a miracle than rain, whether or not the Hopi do their sacred dance?"

"Propitiation," Placido Geist said.

"Climate," Salvador said. "But the Indians believe if they neglect to celebrate the seasons, the seasons won't change."

"And you?"

"I'm hedging my bets," Salvador said, grinning. "I take Communion, but I'm not going in there to steal a can of peaches, whether it's haunted or not."

They watered the horses and hobbled them. There was nothing left of the corrals. They took shelter themselves under a shed roof, mostly poles, but it had shade if they worked a little for it. There was an open hearth and the skeleton of a bellows, hinged out of wood like an artist's easel, with a foot pedal, although the leather pocket to trap air and feed it to the fire had rotted away. It had been a farrier's shop and perhaps a crude smithy. In this country, you learned to make do for yourself, or the country did for you.

Placido Geist woke with a guilty start, fuzzy from the heat and disoriented. Salvador had let him sleep. It bothered the old regulator more that the deputy hadn't disturbed his sleep than that he'd slept. He didn't want Salvador thinking he was going soft and had to be coddled.

Salvador thought no such thing. Placido Geist was short, thick through the trunk, and unprepossessing in appearance, but appearances were deceiving. In the border country, the Mexicans called him *Espectro*, a shape-shifter, a ghost, and although the figure was in dispute, Benny Salvador had heard the aging bounty hunter had as many as forty notches on his belt. It wasn't something a man cared to advertise, and Salvador wasn't going to ask him about it, but he didn't imagine the old man was going soft. Placido Geist could probably ride Benny into the ground.

Settled against the crumbling adobe, his knees drawn up, hat over his eyes, he'd reminded Benny of his grandfather Isidro, another old dinosaur, adapting to the new age. His grandfather even compared himself to a reptile, cold-blooded, drawing body heat from warm rocks, or so he claimed. Watching the old bounty hunter sleep, Benny had been pierced by a terrible grief, not wanting them to slip away. They would, of course, graciously or not. Benny hoped their time hadn't come just yet.

He was saddling the horses when Placido Geist came out from under the shelter of the collapsing smithy.

"Two hours of daylight left, I judge," the older man said.

Salvador nodded, tightening the girths, not trusting in his own response.

"Your job is to stay alive," Placido Geist told him. "You start thinking about watching my back too much, you could get us both killed." He smiled. "Not that I don't appreciate it."

"It won't happen again," Benny said.

"No, just don't get distracted," Placido Geist said to him, meaning no reproach.

They mounted up. The sun was down behind the Chuskas, the earth still giving off the heat of day, but it was noticeably cooler. They turned the heads of the horses west and rode into the gathering twilight.

The murders on the San Francisco docks had occasioned little interest at first, being written off to the usual scurvy doings among sailors, known for their low ways. But when the number reached eight, the po-

lice began serious inquiries. All the victims were foreigners—Russians at that—but they were from different vessels in the main, which would seem to rule out shipboard resentments. There was no common denominator, other than their nationality, although a later review of the evidence indicated that five of the eight had died by ligature, a knotted cord drawn around the larynx.

He used the bowstring, time-honored by the Ottomans—they too had been horsemen of the plains, before their decadence and decline. It was quick, silent, and sure. He was sometimes forced to improvise, but what matter? Two officers off the *Aurora* he'd beaten, and afterward thrown in the harbor, watching them struggle and sink. They'd put up a fight, which was more than most. He was disgusted by how easy it was. They were sheep, and he wanted to kill *men*, not livestock. There was little honor in dispatching unknowing meat.

He'd grown a queue for protective coloration, but of course none of the Chinese accepted him. It was only luck that they were so insular, closing ranks against outsiders like the police—there were the Tongs to answer to, after all—but his luck couldn't hold. Sooner or later he'd make a mistake. He signed aboard a boat bound for Boston, thinking there were other ports that offered him both refuge and opportunity.

They sailed through the recently opened Panama Canal, a miracle of engineering that cut their sailing time by a month, if not more, obviating a trip around the Horn. Docked in Nueces Bay, at Corpus Christi, he jumped ship. It was a decision taken on a whim. Texas was no more than a name, but the storied Great Plains were a lure to his imagination, triggered by a longing he preferred not to name, but which might have been homesickness.

He took the train north to San Antonio, relegated to a cattle car with the other coolies, coach class being for whites, he was told. He took no insult, recognizing the value of anonymity, and the passage was cheap. He'd been careful with his money, and in San Antonio bought a horse and tack. The man who sold it thought to cheat him, but being Buryat, one thing he knew was horses. Nursed on mare's milk, the tribesmen say. He crossed the Edwards Plateau, stopping in San Angelo, and rode on to Lubbock. He chopped off his queue but still wore his hair long, and for the first time he was mistaken for an Indian. He found it an advantage; the thoughtless prejudice of Texans no different from the smug provincialism of Slavs. Certainly none of the Indians he met took him for one of their own, but he noticed that Anglos, as a rule, saw what they wished to see.

He now wore two break-top Smith & Wesson revolvers, carried butt forward, in a sash around his waist. He'd bought them secondhand from a gunsmith behind the Alamo, his eye drawn to them immediately, their profile familiar; when he handled them, their balance was comfortably the same as the .44 Russian he'd shot the czarist major with. These were chambered for .44–40 smokeless, a newer, more powerful cartridge, but

in most other respects he was already used to them. He practiced in the scrub on cactus blossoms, ten paces, twenty, then forty, and found he hadn't lost his touch, although the heavier recoil surprised him at first.

Trouble came calling in the person of an overloud cowboy who made to knock him off a sidewalk in Amarillo, near the stockyards. Even a moment's reflection would have prompted him to keep his head down and accept this indignity, but without thinking he sidestepped, slipped the punch, and hooked the ranny by his bootheels, spilling him into the street. The cowboy's friends were too startled to interfere with this bold Chinaman who simply walked on, but the cowboy stumbled to his feet and pulled a gun. The other cowhands scattered. The cowboy shot at his back. A window shattered. He stopped and turned, drawing one of his weapons. He cocked it, but kept it pointed at the ground. The cowboy, not reading this as a warning, steadied his own pistol with both hands. Jamuga Khan shot him in the head.

The charge of manslaughter was dismissed. Not even a Texas judge would hang a Chinaman when it was so patently a case of self-defense, but the judge suggested that he clear out of town forthwith, before the outraged cowboys took matters into their own hands, and in fact, they lynched some other poor heathen out of frustration.

The main consequence of this unhappy incident was to give him a name (the name he gave himself in court was Wei Chiu) and attach to him a reputation as a *buscadero*, a gunhawk.

They made a cold camp, an unnecessary precaution, perhaps, but instinct made them wary. The light from a fire would be seen a great distance in this empty landscape. Placido Geist accepted Salvador's watchfulness. The country was strange to him. He had an odd presentiment it might be unlucky for one or both of them. The bounty hunter didn't like presentiments and didn't want to share them either. It made him feel old and somehow peculiar, like a Gypsy soothsayer or a staked goat.

Benny Salvador had heard a great many stories about Placido Geist, some of them flattering, even allowing for exaggeration, and all of them painted the old man-killer as larger than life, a description Salvador found lacking or unimaginative. For his own part, Benny thought the bounty hunter not colorless, but dry, as if he'd been baked too long in the oven. Become a name, he seemed to be evaporating behind it, leaving only a shadow.

"A reputation is a hard thing to live up to, or live down," Placido Geist said, as if he were reading Benny's thoughts.

Salvador was too startled to answer.

But the older man wasn't referring to himself. He was offering Salvador some unsolicited advice about the deputy's own increasing celebrity.

Benny wasn't sure how to take this. "You can't be held responsible for what people say about you," he commented. "It's out of your hands."

Placido Geist shrugged. "None of us are indifferent to the opinions of other men," he said.

Salvador decided he'd cut this short. "You're telling me your own notoriety is a burden, and it's not something I should wish for," he said. "I don't. But suppose I can bluff a man because he's heard of me, and not have to kill him; isn't this a gain? Besides, he might in fact be faster, or a better shot."

The older man smiled. "Men like that you try and take from behind," he remarked.

"How many have you shot while they were asleep?" the deputy demanded snappishly.

"None, that I recall," Placido Geist said, "but I've shot a few from cover, at a safe distance."

Benny took a deep breath and blew it out. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was unnecessary and provoking."

"Benny," the old man said, "I have an unfortunate record in that many of the men I've ridden with haven't come back."

The use of his first name so surprised Salvador that he didn't immediately register what Placido Geist had told him. It took a second before the penny actually dropped.

"I'm not given to voicing my regrets," the bounty hunter said. "But like any man, I have enough to spare." He turned to his bedroll and began shaping the ground to his liking, tossing aside a few stones that might dig into his back and cause him an uneasy night.

Benny waited, thinking there might be more, but apparently the older man had said his piece. Benny spread his own blankets and took off his spurs, and they turned in.

When he woke up, there was no moon, only starlight, and Benny lay absolutely still in the darkness, listening, trying to put a name to his apprehension. The horses were close, and he could sense some slight tension in their attitude, heads raised.

A coyote in the rocks, maybe. He made to roll up to a sitting position, his gun already in his hand, when Placido Geist laid two fingers on his shoulder. Be still. Wait. Benny saw in the faint starshine that the bounty hunter was in a squat, his head cocked to one side, as if sniffing the wind. He could have been crouched like that for hours, Benny realized, silent as stone.

The moment passed.

The horses nodded drowsily. Placido Geist relaxed, easing himself down into the sand, no longer hunkered over his big gun like a sentry. Benny had questions, but he felt secure enough to drift back to sleep. Whatever the animals had sensed out in the scrub, it was no immediate threat.

"What kinda Indian are you?" It was Joseph Musket, belligerent and

drunk. He pronounced it "*In-din*," like the word had one too many syllables for his thick tongue.

The exiled Buryat regarded him with amusement. They were in the Panhandle, north of the Canadian. There were fewer Mexicans slap up against Oklahoma, and more Agency Indians, but he could tell the Navajo was off his graze.

"What you drinking?" Musket demanded. "I'll have another one for myself and a fresh glass for my uncle here," he said to the bartender, who looked in no mood to serve him, but Musket wasn't at a tractable stage. A few more and it might be easier to crack his skull and be done with it.

The man who now called himself Wei Chiu took what was on offer, which was busthead whiskey. The tavern was a cheap one, without ornament or polish, a place that served rough sorts like Irishmen and Indians without prejudice, and a Chinaman wearing two pistols at his waist was unlikely to be denied service. It was on the outskirts of Dumas, itself no more than a wide spot in the road. Although it was the county seat, not even the courthouse was fired brick. Every building in town was adobe block or rough lumber, and some older structures were sod, built against Comanche or Kiowa attack in days gone by.

The boy watching Musket's back wasn't more than fifteen or sixteen, Jamuga Khan judged, but older than his years. Also Navajo, he seemed more reserved, more alert and less trusting.

Musket himself should have been more suspicious of his immediate surroundings, but he was indifferent, or too liquored up.

What happened was predictable enough, but his own reaction took the Buryat by surprise. He had no reason to weigh in on anyone's behalf. Navajo Joe Musket was not only drunk but a mean, slit-eyed drunk asking to be thrashed, and a sound whipping might have been just what he needed. It wouldn't have reformed him, but it would have slowed him down some later. The mood in the barroom was turning ugly. A crowd began to eddy around Musket, looking for a chance to take him from behind. The difficulty, Jamuga Khan saw, was that the Navajo boy would fight, too, and was likely to get severely pounded for his trouble. Musket had the bad sense to pull a knife. Jamuga Khan slapped it out of his hand and drew one of his pistols. He cold-cocked Musket, drew his second pistol, and stuck it in the barkeep's face to keep him honest. Standing over the Indian, the Chinaman looked implacable enough to the other patrons, and his two revolvers closed the argument. The boy hoisted Musket under the armpits and dragged him out the door, with Jamuga Khan backing away behind them, covering the room with his guns.

His descent into brigandage was thus accidental, the result of falling in with bad company. This is a common alibi, though it's no excuse. The robbery at the Wells Fargo depot might be written off as a lark, since no one was hurt, but the subsequent ambush of the posse made the Buryat's outlawry absolute. The killings at Coldwater Creek put him beyond

the law's protection, outside an honest man's respect. In a way, this was liberating, as if he'd cast off a suit of store-bought clothes that didn't fit. But he understood the corollary. It meant that now he only answered to himself, and his own discipline would have to be strict.

They broke camp before first light, graining and watering the horses before they saddled up, but they didn't start right away.

Placido Geist made a slow circle of the campsite first, a hundred yards out from where they'd slept. Benny made a wider circle. They cut sign a good five hundred yards out, where someone had hobbled a horse. There were no tracks closer in. Somebody had dismounted and crept up on them, but left no trace, which was disconcerting.

"Shod pony," Benny Salvador remarked.

Placido Geist nodded. Even in this day and age some Indians still rode unshod horses. "Not an Indian, maybe," he said. "Not necessarily a white man, either." He seemed uneasy.

"Trail leads west."

The sun rose at their backs as they rode. By noon they were across the Chuskas. The tracks had petered out in the rock long since. If they were following somebody, he was well out in front.

They reached Horse Mesa in late afternoon, and topping a small rise an hour later, they found themselves overlooking the Zah place. It was meager enough, crowded up against the base of the mesa. There was no one in evidence by the sheep pens as they rode down to the hogan. Placido Geist started to dismount, but Benny motioned him to stay in the saddle. It was common courtesy in the high desert country to wait for somebody to show themselves, he explained.

The two men sat their horses, the sun pressing down on them like a hot fist. It seemed an enormous age before the woman came to the doorway, and when she did, she stood back, shadowed by the darkness inside. Placido Geist couldn't make out her features, and her stillness was almost threatening by itself, as if she took on in her own person the strength of the hovering mesa, the indifference of the bare landscape, something of the very earth. He felt a power, but it wasn't witchcraft, it was a simple confidence. She was of this place and acknowledged it.

Salvador greeted her respectfully, in what Placido Geist took to be Navajo. It sounded thick and glottal, full of starts and stops. The deputy's use of it was halting but serviceable.

The woman stepped forward.

Placido Geist took off his hat, so she could see his face.

"Get down," she said, in English. "Come up to the door."

They did.

"You can water your horses," she told them.

"Thank you for your courtesy," Placido Geist said.

She looked at him, categorizing his face and finding it wanting, he

thought, and turned her attention to Salvador. "You hanged my nephew," she said.

"Not me personally," Benny said. "I was there, though."

She lifted her chin. "He was ill fated," she said. "Never lucky. And unlucky for others. He killed my boy."

There was something elliptical about the conversation. She seemed reluctant to say their names.

"How did he do that?" Salvador asked.

"He took him away," Emily Zah said. "He seduced him."

It was a funny verb to use, Placido Geist reflected, but he knew what she meant.

"Who brought him back?" Salvador asked her.

Placido Geist was suddenly alert to her caution. Emily Zah had been trying not to tell them something.

"He came," she said. "He went."

"Where did he take Emerson?" Benny asked, speaking the dead boy's name aloud.

It was a breach of etiquette, and she seemed to shrink from him. "Medicine Water," she said, drawing back. "To die."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Salvador said. "I meant no disrespect to your grief."

But the interview was over. She went back into the house.

They led the horses over to the watering trough.

"Where is this place?" Placido Geist asked.

"Medicine Water? Up on the Defiance Plateau, in Canyon del Muerto. It's a spring, said to have the power of healing."

"Why would she give us that information?"

Salvador shrugged. "I'd guess she was baiting a trap," the deputy said, glancing back over his shoulder at the hogan.

Placido Geist nodded. "He's already been shadowing us."

There were still a few hours of daylight left. They got on their horses again and rode west.

The boy was gutshot.

Musket had sent the younger Navajo to run off the posse's horses, giving him time to circle the camp. Then he abruptly started shooting. The Buryat had been startled by Musket's precipitation, but the thing was done. The lawmen had returned fire as they ducked for cover, and the boy was hit by an aimless bullet. He was doubled over on a stolen horse when they found him, gasping from the pain, and barely able to ride. Musket had wanted to leave the boy behind. Jamuga Khan persuaded him otherwise. Musket, a coward at heart, was unwilling to challenge him, but they parted company soon after, Musket riding away alone.

Navajo Joe had a date with the hangman, an appointment he kept in a week's time, but the Buryat was vouchsafed no foreknowledge of this. He brought the boy to a veterinarian, a horse doctor, and held a gun to the

man's head while he operated. It was a decent enough job, given the circumstances. The veterinarian got the bullet out, but peritonitis set in a day later. The boy was feverish and obviously wouldn't last long. They trailed across northern New Mexico, through the Sangre de Cristo, and across the Jemez, steering clear of towns, resting during the daylight hours, and traveling at night. Emerson's abdomen was swollen with infection, his dressings soaked with pus. By the third day he could no longer ride, and the Buryat had to rig a travois and drag him. The terrain was broken, seamed with arroyos, hard on internal injuries. By the time they got to the Zah homestead, the boy was sinking fast. The wound was putrid. It was nothing short of a miracle he'd held out as long as he did.

At the Navajo woman's instruction, Jamuga Khan fashioned a shelter for the dying boy a little distance from the hogan. He didn't understand the taboo itself, why she didn't want her son to die in the house, but he understood the fundamental usage and consolation of ceremony and honored it. Emerson drifted in and out of delirium, sometimes recognizing his mother, sometimes not. But late in the afternoon, his fever abated enough that he asked her for something, his voice barely a whisper.

She turned to the Buryat.

Jamuga Khan knew an obligation was going to be laid on him.

He looked forward to performing it.

"How did she know about Musket?" Placido Geist wondered.

"Educated guess. He was born to hang."

Placido Geist glanced over at him.

Benny grinned. "Maybe she read it in the stars," he said. "More likely somebody heard it at a trading post and rode out to tell her."

"She said 'you,' Benny. *You* hanged my nephew."

"It's not like she seems to hold a grudge," Salvador said. "She probably figures if somebody had hanged Navajo Joe a little earlier, her son might still be alive."

"What's to say he isn't? It's easy enough for her to claim Emerson's dead, in hopes we'd give up the chase."

"No," Salvador said. "If he were alive, it wouldn't have upset her to hear his name. More traditional Navajo avoid naming the dead. I was surprised that she referred to either of them, even indirectly. My guess is that Emerson made it home in the company of this Chinaman, but the kid was hurt. Mrs. Zah holds Musket responsible. Now, why the Chinaman would agree to haul a dying boy up to Medicine Water is another question. We don't know what happened next."

"He circled behind, to check his back trail."

"We're not altogether sure that was the Chinaman," Salvador said, meaning whoever had spied on them the night before.

"Educated guess," Placido Geist commented, smiling.

They were camped on the rimrock above Whiskey Creek, which ran

through Canyon de Chelly. This time of year, there was very little water in the creek bed, the snowmelt having already run off; by next month it would be bone dry. The canyon country of the Defiance Plateau had been the last refuge of the Navajo when Kit Carson had mounted his campaign to chase them down, and Canyon de Chelly was where he'd bottled them up in the end. It was a place full of ghosts, going back to the Anasazi. The ruins of abandoned cliff dwellings, shelter now to lizards and scorpions, huddled beneath the overhang of the rock face, the roof poles collapsed and the adobe softened by erosion. Canyon del Muerto lay some eight or ten miles north, but it was rough ground to cover and they meant to get an early start, hoping to reach Medicine Water before daybreak, or not long past it.

"You don't like it, either," Placido Geist remarked.

"Not much," Salvador admitted. "He'll be laying for us."

"You think you know the country better than he does?"

"Nope," Salvador said. "Even an Indian could get lost up here. We have to figure the Chinaman's had a chance to scout out the ground, and it puts us at a disadvantage. But we're two to his one, if that counts for anything."

"We'll have to take care one of us doesn't get shot."

"Any thoughts on that score?"

The older man shook his head. "I've been shot twice," he said. "I can't say as I recommend the experience. Short of our turning back, though, I don't see how we skirt the risk."

Salvador hadn't considered giving up, and he was surprised at the mention of it, even as a rhetorical suggestion, but he wondered if the bounty hunter weren't feeling his age. The man was hard to read. When he seemed at his most transparent, there was still an impenetrable reserve, obdurate as earth.

Placido Geist didn't realize how he appeared to Salvador. He counted frankness as one of his virtues and thought of himself as a simple person. He would have been startled if the younger man had told him he was obscure and difficult. It never occurred to him that he might be less than obvious.

"He may be long gone," Salvador said.

Placido Geist nodded. "Emily Zah could have been trying to throw us off the scent," he agreed.

Neither one of them really thought that. All the signals pointed to a killer waiting for them up the trail. Salvador offered to take the first watch, and Placido Geist turned in for a few hours of uneasy rest.

The boy died on the way up the mesa, as Jamuga Khan had known he would. His mother had known it, too, and the Buryat thought about why Mrs. Zah had accepted Emerson's final importunity. He himself had no difficulty understanding the boy's request, or his own part in carrying it

out. If the boy wanted to be buried near a sacred place—or something approximating a sacred place—it was to cure not his body, but his spirit. The Buryat understood as well the need to assuage a troubled spirit. He could have refused this duty, without explanation, and Emily Zah would have held him blameless, but he welcomed the opportunity.

The whole business, which had begun with his stepping in unasked to save Musket's nephew a hiding, was no more than an accident of circumstance, but it now seemed somehow *fated*. A man's destiny was written on his forehead, after all, and no amount of ducking and weaving could turn it aside.

She never asked him about Musket, and he didn't volunteer.

Emerson had gone off with his uncle—why? In search of adventure, or simply to protect a man who was more childish than himself? Nobody explained it to the Buryat, but Jamuga Khan knew without being told that Emerson wanted to make amends, not for some default, some omission or evasion of responsibility, but for his own vanity in thinking he was larger than a world that brought him up short with a bullet in the belly. Jamuga Khan realized this was a conceit he shared, to imagine escape or immunity from consequence, from reprisal, from the favor or forgiveness of God, and he felt contaminated by his own hatreds.

It was Emily Zah who put this to him plainly. He didn't follow all her instructions, the preparations, the yucca root to wash the dead boy's hair and the rest, but certainly she knew that, knew he'd forget, or get it wrong. It was important that she go through the motions, at least. Make an effort. And then the last thing, which she took care he understood, making him repeat it back to her in his uncertain English. She adjured him to cleanse *himself*, to purify his heart.

It wasn't something he could do easily, not something he could easily accept needed doing. Necessity he could accept, to occupy himself with needful errands. He buried the boy in the rocks above the spring, discharging his first chore. But to recognize that the Navajo woman had seen the sickness in his own spirit, that she even thought him worth saving, was more than he bargained for. The last thing he wanted was hope.

He rode down off the mesa, back the way he'd come, but he didn't stop at the Zah place. He'd done what he agreed to, and he didn't want her questioning him, as if he'd promised more. He rode at night and found shade by day. It was the second night he came almost too close to the camp, but in that still, bare place sound traveled a long way, the click of a stone, the muffled scrape of hobbles, and he sensed the presence of the other horses almost before his own horse smelled them. The mare whickered. He pulled her up short and dismounted.

Placido Geist and Deputy Salvador had reconstructed his approach accurately when they found his tracks in the morning.

He'd tied off the horse and crept in closer, but not near enough to be observed himself. Nor did he want to spook their mounts.

He thought about the fact that they'd built no fire. He came to the conclusion they were careful men. Manhunters, maybe.

He returned to his horse and led her a good distance off before he climbed back in the saddle. He turned her head west, turning back on his trail yet again. And again, a day later, he gave the Zah spread a wide berth. There was more reason now than before not to face up to Emerson's mother. He didn't want her to be an accomplice. At the same time, he knew she'd direct the bounty hunters to Medicine Water, accidentally on purpose.

Cleanse *yourself*, he'd been told. That covered a multitude of sins. If the men were in fact bounty hunters, they'd be headed for Emily Zah's, looking to cut sign. He wondered how professional they were. Casual mercenaries wouldn't venture so far, and the law was too complacent to pursue him. It suggested something else, perhaps a personal grievance. He wasn't the only one with scores to settle, he knew. Or they were simply determined, for reasons of their own. Cleanse *yourself*, she'd instructed him, but she let it hang, as if he should already know how best to do it, as if he could penetrate the darkness in his mind. Find absolution, she meant. Find your own way.

And if he were more than slightly mad by this point? He was past acknowledging it to himself, and it didn't much matter.

He was damned. What business of hers if he fell in the pit?

They saddled up in the chilly darkness and rode out before first light, the horses picking their way across the broken ground. They found it rough going, and it was noon before they came to the lip of Canyon del Muerto, a gouge worn deep in the mesa. No chance of surprise, they admitted.

It seemed to Placido Geist that the canyon was a sort of map. It plunged through geologic time, layers of sediment that took you back to the Neolithic and before—a book to be read, if you knew the language, but his vocabulary was limited. He was caught in the dangerous present, without an interpreter. He had no useful skills in that regard. He had only age on his side.

They rode up the canyon to where it petered out. Salvador reined in. "Down there." He pointed. Placido Geist saw nothing but sandstone. "The pool, in the rocks," the deputy said. "The spring feeds it."

Up on the mesa, sitting their horses, they were exposed. But there was no cover, nowhere for a rifleman to lie concealed. Down in the canyon, it might be different.

They scattered grain on the ground for the horses, and hobbled them. Salvador took his braided leather lariat off the saddle horn. Rawhide would stretch, but it wouldn't give. He secured it to a piñon, wound it around some settled boulders, and prepared to climb down. Placido Geist crouched at the edge of the canyon wall, his big Sharps across his knees.

He was watching the far side of the canyon, although he knew the first sign of trouble would be the first shot, without warning. The deputy knew it, too. Salvador levered himself over the edge and let himself down on the rope, finding a foothold.

He glanced up. "Any advice?"

Placido Geist didn't look down at him. He was watching the canyon wall opposite. "Don't dawdle," he said.

Benny shinnied down the rope, holding himself off the rocks with his feet as he bounced from outcrop to outcrop, the rope burning his hands. He dropped onto a ledge that led up into the last dogleg of the canyon, and unslung his Winchester carbine.

It was the old man's turn. Placido Geist didn't like having his back to a bullet, and he didn't like hanging over eternity on a rope. The less he thought about it, the better. He slung himself over the edge and worked his way down, thinking only of the task at hand, not of the risks. Salvador pulled him down beside him, and Placido Geist slithered behind a rock.

"Not elegant, but we're here," Salvador said.

"Might not be as easy to get back up," Placido Geist said.

Benny smiled. "There's that," he said.

They worked their way crabwise up the ledge, covering each other, one of them moving forward, the other one hanging back, and then they reversed positions, leapfrogging. It felt foolish, but there was nothing foolish about it. For all they knew, they'd been in someone's sights from the start. What was foolish was to assume otherwise. The ledge was blocked by a rockfall, and they scrambled over it, skidding down the talus on the far side and ducking under an overhang for cover.

The pool was at the mouth of a deep pocket in the rocks, the stone worn smooth by seepage. They moved in behind the pool and hunkered back against the sloping wall. It wasn't quite tall enough for them to stand. Even if they whispered, their whispers echoed back to them, amplified by the curious acoustics. It was like being inside the bell of a musical instrument.

They caught their breath and then moved forward, in a crouch, to the front of the cave. The ragged layers of sandstone fell away below them, six or eight hundred feet, down to the canyon floor. The sandstone was ribboned with quartz, mica, feldspar, baked in the hard sunlight to a dusty khaki, and if you looked closer, pink and violet and green. Red for iron ore, blue for copper oxides. To the untutored eye, it was just featureless desert country, stone and scrub, but for someone who could read the landscape, it was endlessly astonishing.

Placido Geist was trying to read the landscape for danger.

Anywhere above them in this last upper reach of the canyon was a good position for a rifleman, the range in places less than a hundred yards. This pocket in the rocks would be a bad place to get pinned down.

Salvador was thinking the same thing. "Maybe he's not here at all," he said. "He's had an opportunity to shoot at us."

"Or he's waiting for a better one," Placido Geist said. He turned back into the cave and squatted at the pool for a drink. The water tasted sulphurous and metallic, full of minerals. The edges of the pool were crusted with crystalline deposits.

"He buried the boy up here," Salvador said. "Probably on his mother's instructions. I still don't see why she'd send him such a distance."

"You said the Navajo were funny about death."

"But they're not irreligious or indifferent. In fact, the opposite." He paused thoughtfully.

"What?"

"Maybe she did it for *him*," Benny said. "For the Chinaman, not her son."

"I don't follow," Placido Geist said.

"He's not Navajo," Benny said.

Placido Geist waited.

"They have ceremonies," Benny said, thinking out loud. "Rituals, some of them two or three days long, to put ghosts to rest or chase away malevolent spirits. What if she thought they wouldn't work for him? What if she prescribed some kind of home remedy?"

"She assigns him a test, you mean. Like the prince who has to prove his virtue in a fairy tale."

"Why did they split up? Musket and his nephew?"

"Thieves fall out."

Salvador shook his head. "If the boy were hurt, Musket would have left him to die," he said. "But the Chinaman brought him back to his mother."

"People are more complicated than we give them credit for," Placido Geist admitted.

"She offered him something in return."

"Redemption?"

Salvador looked at him. "If redemption were offered, would *you* take it?" he asked.

Placido Geist didn't know how to answer. "My sins are too many, and my regrets too few," he said after a space. "Even if God forgave me, I'd have to forgive myself."

"And how could you forgive Him for that?" Benny asked with a small smile.

Placido Geist looked back over his shoulder at the canyon, where a man could be lying in ambush. "Well, what if *we* provide the test, Benny?" he asked.

Salvador nodded. "What do you make of that?" He pointed.

On the far side of the pool was a small pile of rocks. Placido Geist had noticed it there but attached no significance to it. Now he realized it was a sort of cairn, larger rocks at the base, getting smaller in size

toward the top, like a steeple or a pyramid. An offering? Or perhaps a warning.

"It's not Indian," Salvador said.

"Chinese?"

"I wouldn't know," Salvador said.

"He's been here," Placido Geist said.

"And now he's out there."

"Remade at Emily Zah's invitation," Placido Geist said.

"Or not," Salvador said. "But we'll never find him, not if we search to the ends of the earth."

Which was almost certainly true, the old bounty hunter had to agree. After all, this *was* the end of the earth. They'd let their man vanish into it.

Salvador fished in the stones between his feet, absently.

Placido Geist thought he was simply woolgathering, but Salvador bent down and began picking through them until he made a choice and sat up with a small, dark, odd-shaped stone in his hand.

Placido Geist was curious but too polite to ask.

Salvador glanced up at him and smiled. He held the stone out on his palm. Turned to the light, it could almost be taken for a small animal. "Desert fox," Benny said. "It's a fetish among the Pueblo tribes. Camouflage, cover. The little hunter blending in with the terrain." He got to his feet.

"You think he's close by?" Placido Geist asked him.

"I imagine he's watching us right now," Salvador said.

"And you mean to let him go?"

"If he lets *us* go," Salvador said.

The old man took a deep breath. There were a lot of things in that breath. Too many to be contained. He breathed out.

They shouldered their guns and got ready to scabble along the ledge and climb back out of the canyon, wary of surprise.

Before they left the pool Salvador took his little rock and cautiously balanced it on the cairn.

It was that small act, probably, that saved Salvador's life.

From his hide in the rocks opposite, the Buryat had a clean shot at both men and didn't take it. He'd watched them make their way along the canyon and held his fire, wanting to be sure. He knew nothing of either man, by name or reputation. He had no idea that if he'd killed Salvador and left Placido Geist alive, the bounty hunter would have pursued him into the teeth of hell to find him and tear his heart out. No, the Buryat had his own reasons. The tall man, the younger one, had shown respect, or at least courtesy. Jamuga Khan was startled, since he'd seen so little of it.

Had he been purified? Unhappily, not. Caulterized, yes, annealed, blistered, case-hardened, reforged on an anvil of hard choices.

If redemption were offered, would he take it?

His answer was the same as the bounty hunter's, although neither one of them knew it. And what Benny Salvador had said was also true: if God could forgive you for such sins, how could you possibly forgive God?

You could only bow to necessity.

Benny Salvador returned to his house under the cottonwoods, and Placido Geist went back to Texas, but the two men wrote each other occasionally, a correspondence that was gossip, informal, and sometimes awkward when it touched on the personal. There was a sad letter from Salvador when Teresa was delivered of her child and the baby was born dead. Placido Geist was careful not to sound too conventional or maudlin a note, but he honestly mourned their loss, so like his own these many years past.

Of the Buryat, Jamuga Khan, nothing more was heard. At least, nothing that showed his handwriting. Some odd stories filtered out of the back country from time to time, though. One in particular caught Salvador's attention.

"You might find this curious," Salvador wrote to Placido Geist. "I heard it secondhand from a Mormon who runs a trading post south of Lukachukai, the far side of the Chuskas."

The story concerned a Russian nobleman, the Grand Duke Dmitri or some such, second cousin to the Romanovs. By now the United States had entered the European war and the Russians had withdrawn. A revolution had overthrown the czar, but Grand Duke Dmitri had escaped with much of his fortune and was touring the West. He and a small party had set out to explore the canyons of the Defiance Plateau, to see the Anasazi ruins for themselves and bring back some souvenirs. They were warned that the country was difficult, the cliff dwellings hard to reach, and that evil spirits haunted the mesa. This talk was dismissed as bluff and superstition, the local Indian tribes trying to discourage graverobbers and looters, which was true enough. In the event, the czar's cousin packed into the canyons anyway, his arrogance proof against caution. He failed to return. A search for his party was abandoned after three weeks.

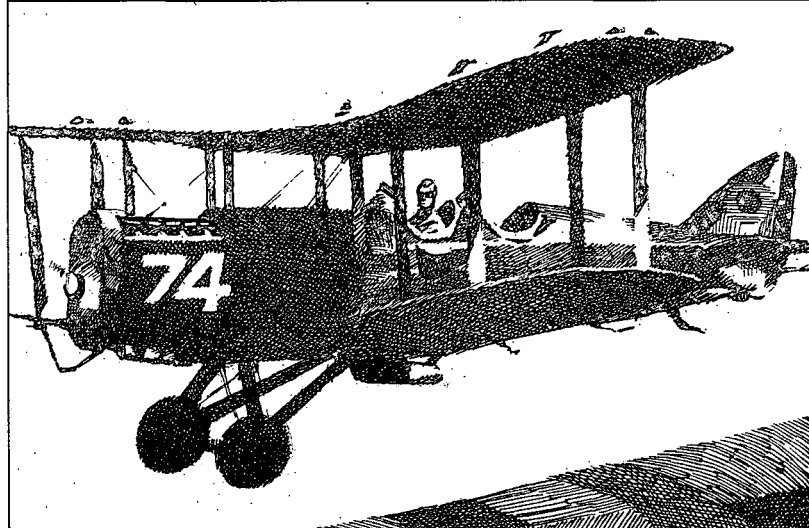
Not a trace was found of them, not even their horses. Not a bridle, not a buckle, not a stitch, neither hoof nor hide. It was as if the earth had swallowed them up.

FICTION



FALLOUT

William F. Hallstead



The quiet northeastern Pennsylvania August afternoon offered not even a hint of tragedy. Then the airport's low-winged, single engined PT-19 howled in from the west, yawing and pitching as if a panicky pilot were at the controls. But Joe Pritch-et was Hardington Municipal Airport's steadiest flight instructor.

The lemon-yellow army surplus trainer nosed down in a straight-in landing approach—downwind. No heed at all to the windsock or the airport's mandatory traffic pattern. The plane bounced hard, settled, then swung off the runway and taxied hell-for-leather for the concrete apron. A bunch of us instructors and G.I. Bill students stood out there wondering just what was going on with Chief Instructor Pritch-et and the student he'd taken off with a half hour ago.

As the plane taxied onto the apron and the engine died, I saw that only the forward open cockpit was occupied. Or was Pritch-et hunched down in the rear seat to fix something. Or maybe sick?

He had taken off with student Alec Wharton in the front cockpit. But only Wharton scrambled out. The rear cockpit that Instructor Pritch-et had buckled himself into on takeoff was empty. Had Pritch-et landed them at some other airport, then sent Wharton back here alone? That could be enough of an infraction to get him a serious reprimand from our discipline-obsessed airport manager.

One look at Wharton as he yanked off his goggles and helmet told me—told all of us—that

Pritch-et's student was in a state of panic.

"My God! Oh my God!" His screech sent an icy wave straight up my spine.

I raced toward him, trailed by everyone else.

"Where's Pritch-et?" I yelled.

"He's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"He . . . Pritch-et . . ."

"Calm down," I told him. "What the hell happened?"

"Let me handle this," a gritty voice ordered. Marty Meehan had plowed through the growing crowd behind me. I stood aside for our bulldog of an airport manager.

"It was horrible," Alec Wharton babbled. Sweat matted his dark hair. His lanky six-foot frame jittered in his khaki flight coveralls. "I can't believe it happened."

"Get a grip on yourself," Meehan ordered, his jowly face jutting into Wharton's sheet-white grimace of disbelief. "Exactly *what* happened?"

Wharton ran a hand through his sweaty mop and sucked in a shaky breath. "We were practicing acrobatics—"

"So where's your parachute?" Meehan demanded. "Airport rule. No acrobatics without parachutes. Pritch-et have one?"

In the dead silence, I could hear the drone of one of the airport's Piper Cubs down in the south practice area five miles away.

"Neither of us had chutes," Wharton said in a near whisper.

Meehan's exhale was close to a groan.

"We were practicing stall recov-

eries," Wharton rushed on, "but Pritchett decided to demonstrate a loop. We nosed down, picked up speed, then up, over—and that's when it happened."

"Exactly what, damn it!" Meehan yelled.

"Right at the top, he . . . he fell out! Gone. I still can't believe it."

Meehan—all of us—stared at him.

"How high were you?" Meehan finally managed to get out, as if that made any difference.

"Three thousand."

Silence. I heard the distant Cub's engine noise rise and fade. The heat radiating from the concrete apron felt as if someone had suddenly thrown open a blast furnace door.

Meehan blew out a raggedy sigh and all of his bluster went with it. "Where?" he almost whispered.

"West practice area. Over those big cornfields just beyond Lonesome Pond."

To my surprise, Meehan—usually as warm as wood—put an arm around Wharton's shoulders. "Cripes, kid, what a hell of a thing to go through. Good job bringing the plane back in yourself. How many hours you got in it?"

"Three."

"Just three. Look, try to pull yourself together, go upstairs and wait in my office."

Meehan motioned to Bill Collins, our gloom-faced, string bean chief mechanic edging through the crowd.

"Check it out, Bill. I want to know what the hell happened up there." Meehan turned to me. "Looks like you're chief instructor now, George."

"Lousy way to get a promotion," I muttered.

"Yeah. You come upstairs, too. I want you in on this."

In Meehan's sparse office, he asked Sally Taylor, his middle-aged secretary, to go brew a fresh pot of coffee. This was 1948, when it was okay to ask secretaries to make coffee. Silex in hand, she left us. Meehan shut the office door. For a long moment, he stood at the big window, his back to us, staring out at the hangar apron and the airport's two paved runways.

Alec Wharton hunched in a chair near the window, both hands knuckle-white on its arms. I sat on the edge of the chair by the door. Marty Meehan finally sank into his creaky swivel behind the desk with yet another ragged sigh.

"Holy Lord," he rumbled. "I don't need this."

He pulled a file folder from his desk drawer. Opened it. Took out a pair of horn-rimmed glasses I'd never seen him wear before. Studied the file. "Okay," he said to Wharton, "you got your private ticket last month. Joe Pritchett was your instructor for the commercial course, which you're three hours into at the moment. So you've logged about forty-five, fifty flying hours. Right?"

"Forty-seven, counting today."

"Pritchett checked you out in the PT-19 after one hour of dual."

"Yes."

"Come to think of it, didn't I see you take off solo in that plane sometime before noon?"

"Right. At eleven. Pritchett sent me out to practice power-on and power-off stalls. He said to come

back in forty-five minutes, pick him up, and he was to check on how well I'd done."

"And three thousand feet over the west practice area, Pritchett decided, for some damn reason, to show you a loop?"

Wharton stared at the floor. "That's right."

"Then he—" A knock on the door stopped him. "Yeah?"

Mechanic Bill Collins's horsey face peered in. "Thought you oughta know, Marty. The seat belt in the PT-19's rear cockpit broke."

"Broke! Jesus, why?"

"Frayed where it rubbed on the left edge of the metal bucket seat."

Meehan sat back, elbow on the chair arm, hand cupping his chin and his fingers over his mouth as if he just didn't want to say anything more. But he had to.

"Bill, don't you check seat belts?"

"Hell, Marty, I check engines, airframes, controls, oil and fuel systems." He flared red. "Never heard of a seat belt needing maintenance. Who checks seat belts?"

Meehan stared at him. Then he muttered, "That'll be all, Bill. Thanks."

Collins left, and now Meehan looked at me. I could see him crumpling inside.

"I gotta call the CAA," he groaned, "and the State Aviation Authority and the State Police. When the police get here, George, I want you and Wharton to go out in one of the Cubs and help locate Pritchett's body. Unless somebody finds him and calls in before the cops show up. Or calls them. Or—" He realized he was rambling. "Hell,

just stand by until I get this mess in hand."

Nobody called in the discovery of a body out there in the west practice area. Twenty minutes after Meehan phoned the Hardington Barracks, two gray Pennsylvania State Police cars pulled up to the airport fence. One of the dark-gray uniformed troopers stayed at the airport to interview Meehan—and for sure, mechanic Bill Collins. The other trooper headed west. He would keep an eye on the Cub I would pilot with Wharton as my spotter in the rear seat of the cramped, tandem two-place—

"I'm not going," Wharton announced. "I'm never going to fly again."

Oh, fine. Here we stood on the flight line at the edge of the hangar apron, about to search for Pritchett's body, and the only one who knew where it was had a case of flight jitters. Not that I blamed him. I didn't like this assignment, either. But the thought of former P-51 fighter pilot Joe Pritchett moldering away in the August heat overcame any hesitation on my part. I'd been a copilot on B-24 bombers in Italy, and P-51 fighter cover had been the primary reason I was still alive.

"Joe Pritchett flew sixty-eight missions, some of them in support of ground troops," I told Wharton. "I heard you were with Patton. You ever get any help from '51 pilots, Alec?"

"Coupla times," he murmured.

"Then get in this damn airplane." That was harsh, but I was

finding Alec Wharton to be not the most likeable of our student pilots. Struck me that he was a tad more concerned about himself than about the pilot who had died trying to teach him. He had been my student through his private pilot training. I'd found him introverted, humorless, but fanatically devoted to earning his private ticket so he could move up to the commercial course. I'd had him tagged as a career pilot in the making, but now his resolve had collapsed.

With a long, hard glance at me, he climbed into the little yellow monoplane and strapped himself into the rear seat. I spun the prop. The engine caught, ticked over. I wedged into the front seat and closed the top and bottom halves of the split door. We took off into the light west wind.

In a few minutes, Wharton tapped my shoulder and pointed a few degrees to the left.

"It happened over those cornfields just past the pond," he shouted over the Cub's engine racket.

I swung left. Somewhere behind us, the police unit was picking its way through rural roads, following as best it could.

Five minutes later, on my fourth 500-foot-high pass over the corn rows, I spotted what had to be Pritchett's crumpled body. A khaki-clad sprawl between rows. Nobody else anywhere in sight. The nearest farm house was a good mile and a half north. I circled until the cop car caught up, turned off the nearby county road into the dirt farm lane, and stopped. The troop-

er stepped out and began to make his way into the field. I headed back to the airport.

"That's it," Wharton said in my ear as we trundled to the hangar apron. "As of right now, I'm done with flying."

I swung the Cub into the tie-down line and cut the switch. "Listen to me, Alec," I told him. "You came here all the way from—where was it?"

"Ludlum, Indiana."

"From Indiana to earn yourself a flying career. And, damn it, you were my best private student. Soloed in just six hours of dual. Most everybody takes eight. Why throw it all away because of—"

"You weren't up there seeing him fall out."

"I've seen a whole damn bomber blow up and everybody fall out. I flew the next day."

"That was combat. You had to."

He had me there. "Look. Give it some thought, will you?"

"I've given it all the thought I need to. I'm—"

Knuckles rapped on the Plexiglas upper half of my closed door. The trooper who'd stayed at the airport bent down. "Alec Wharton? I need to talk to you."

The six-foot-three trooper, his broad-brimmed campaign hat tipped aggressively forward, took Wharton upstairs to Marty Meehan's office. I heard the door shut, then Meehan clumped down the steps.

"Go in the hangar and take a look at that seat belt, George. Tell me what you think."

I found Bill Collins up on the

right wing, leaning into the rear cockpit.

"Must be the tenth time I've checked this belt," he muttered. "I still don't believe it." He held up the buckle strap. About a foot of the other strap was still tightly in place. "Take a look at the busted end, George."

The belt had broken where it had been pulled over the left edge of the metal bucket seat. The broken end showed a lot of fraying for an inch or so from the ragged break.

I reached down and fished up the stump of the broken piece. It, too, was badly frayed.

The trooper we'd left at the cornfield directed the county coroner to Pritchett's body. Then, since Weston Township had no police of its own, he interviewed the few farmers who could have possibly witnessed the accident. However, it had taken place at midday when the several farmers close enough to have seen Pritchett fall were home eating lunch. One, though, had seen a low-winged plane make a pass over the vicinity of Lonesome Pond, but he was certain that had been at 11:30 A.M., not around noon. The next day, a CAA investigator interviewed that same farmer. He stuck to his story.

No one had witnessed Pritchett's deadly fall. No one had to. The facts spoke for themselves.

Bill Collins, of course, lost his job. He was taken to court, but his war record got him a hung jury. Bill had won the Bronze Star defending Henderson Field on Guadalcanal

against a Japanese suicide assault. Killed five of them with a borrowed carbine; not bad for a Marine aircraft mechanic. The county prosecutor decided against a retrial, but the CAA pulled Bill's mechanic's license. The airport's spirit faltered and began to die. The G.I. Bill student flow dwindled to a trickle. I saw no future as an instructor on commission. Three bucks was not a bad hourly rate in those days, but instructors were paid only for increasingly sparse flying hours. I took a shot at selling home air conditioners for a new company in Hardington that was a decade ahead of itself. It was the wrong time, and Pennsylvania was the wrong place. The girl I'd hoped to marry left me for a stockbroker. I left town for a greener pasture.

My aborted A/C salesman career had given me a certain glibness. I talked my way into a PR slot for a Philadelphia-based shopping center developer.

In the summer of 1954, I was driving west on U.S. 40 toward Indianapolis to set up a press party announcing our proposed shopping mall there. Around noon that sun-drenched July day, I was ready for a lunch stop. Out of the shimmering distance emerged a little sign: LUDLUM 4 MILES. Hope they have a restaurant there, I thought. Then my subconscious twanged. Ludlum? Where had I heard something about Ludlum? Got it. My old flight student Alec Wharton had come from Ludlum, Indiana.

He hadn't come from much of a town. A scatter of houses, then a skinny business district flanked

both sides of Route 40 as it arrowed through on its way to the state capital another thirty dead-straight miles out there beyond the heat waves. On the right, though, I spotted blue letters on a small white marquee. I slowed down, then angle-parked in front of the Kosy Kafe, the only out-of-state license in the whole Hoosier row.

The Kosy Kafe looked small-town drab, but it smelled fine: home fries and fresh baking. The eight or so tables along the left side of the hole-in-the-wall eatery were occupied. The counter to the right had seats open. I slid onto a red-cushioned stool near the door. The counter was serviced by a chunky, middle-aged woman in a pale green uniform. Big hairpins piled her too-yellow hair on top of her head. Stitched above her left breast in dark green thread: MAVIS. She looked hard, but her voice was soft.

"Hi. Welcome to Ludlum. What can I get you?"

I ordered a cheeseburger, fries, banana cream pie, and coffee. No conscience twinge at all; the nation's appetite-withering food police were decades in the future.

We bantered about the steamy weather, Pennsylvania versus Indiana as great places to live, why I was driving to Indianapolis. Then I mentioned Alec Wharton. "Told me he was from here. You ever heard of him?"

Mavis rolled her brown eyes. "Who hasn't? Pretty wild story there."

"Oh? How so?"

"Well, actually, it was more about

his sister." She leaned close. I'd struck a chord with a gossip.

"His sister?"

"Yeah. She was Corn Queen back in nineteen forty-five. Or was it forty-six? Anyway, she was—" Mavis dropped her voice to a near-whisper "—raped."

I gave her a blank stare. Such frank gossiping wasn't exactly commonplace in the 1950s. Especially to strangers. Or was it because I *was* a transient stranger that she felt free to impress me with local scandal?

"That's what she swore happened to her. Done by one of them crop-duster pilots. Come here in the spring for the bug season, gone by late summer. Anyway, it really set Alec wild, his sister—a married woman—treated like a common . . . a common I-don't-know-what."

"So what happened to the duster pilot?"

"Him? He claimed it was consequence—conse—"

"Consensual?"

"That's it. Sure kicked off the town's motormouths. Next day, he bugged out. Never seen again. Alec was away somewheres. When he got back a couple days later, I never seen him in such a swivet. Rammed around town like a crazy man for a couple weeks. Then he just up and left Ludlum. I reckon he couldn't take all the talk."

"But he'd had nothing to do with what happened."

"Yeah," Mavis agreed, "but you don't know small towns."

"Did they ever nail the duster pilot?"

"Not that I heard. He was a gypsy, worked for himself. He could be anywhere—anyway, it woulda been his word against hers. And you know what they do to the woman in a trial like that." She gave me a warm smile. "You gonna be in town long?"

Now she was getting a bit more buddy-buddy than I wanted to be. I asked for the check, left her a good-sized tip, and headed for the door. Then I stopped. Walked back to the counter where she was picking up the check and money. A really disturbing thought had hit me. I hesitated. But I had to ask.

"What was that duster pilot's name, Mavis?"

"Richard."

Now I felt better.

"No, wait a minute," she said. "That was his last name. First name was Joe. Joe Richard. Or maybe Richards."

"Or—" my mouth went dry. "Or maybe . . . Pritchett?"

"Oh, yeah! That was it. Joe Pritchett."

In Indianapolis, I registered at the same midtown hotel where, through a dozen phone calls during the past three weeks, I'd arranged for the announcement party. Now I checked out the meeting room, consulted with the hors d'oeuvres chef, called the local graphics company one more time. Everything was in order. But all through my logistical checkout, I was preoccupied with what I'd heard back in that obscure Ludlum eatery.

After a London broil in the hotel grill room, I went back to my

fourth-floor single and called Hardington, Pa., information. Held my breath. Yes, William Collins still lived there. Got him on the third ring.

"Who? George Nichols? Oh, my God, of course! You were chief instructor after Pritchett was . . . after Pritchett."

His voice wasn't as confident as I'd remembered.

"I'd like to sit down with you, Bill. I've learned something you'll want to hear."

"I'm available. Too damned available. Name the time and place."

"I can make it to Hardington late afternoon the day after tomorrow. Say around six P.M. You name the place."

I expected his home address, but he gave me directions to the Anthracite Tavern on Spruce Street.

"Sounds fine, Bill. Supper on me."

The company brass arrived in Indianapolis at noon—in a chartered Piper Apache. No five hundred-mile Chevy chug for those four. My non-event went off like greased clockwork, a highly attended demonstration that you can buy a lot of media coverage with a few good graphics, a mound of lobster pâté, and free-flowing hootch. I reveled in corporate congratulations, lavishly tipped the help with company largess, and was eastbound on U.S. 40 by five P.M.

The stress of the Indianapolis do, combined with the hideous 1948 scenario my mind was spinning, did me in just east of Columbus, Ohio. I pulled past a sputtering neon MOTEL MODERNE sign,

parked, and signed in. Slept late, had rock-hard fried eggs, scorched toast, but surprisingly good coffee and hit the road again around ten.

I'd underestimated the time it would take me to go almost the entire loopy length of the Pennsylvania Turnpike before I cut northeast on U.S. 11 through Wilkes-Barre, then up the long valley beyond. A blood-red sunset tinted the valley's rim as I bumped through the dismal outskirts of Hardington. A coal town in the oil age, its edges were tattering. I didn't find the Anthracite Tavern until a few minutes after seven o'clock. A lost cause, by now. Bill Collins surely would have given up and gone home wondering just what I'd thought was so important.

But there, in the beery, cigarette-hazed murk, he sat alone in a dark-stained booth for four, nursing a bottle of Pabst. He looked a lot more than half a decade older. Stubby chin, sunken eyes. The face of a man in defeat.

But he brightened when he saw me pushing past the crowd at the bar. Not a noisy crowd, just a mutter. All older guys. A spiritless clientele swallowing numbness, knowing King Coal would never rule again.

I thanked Bill profusely for waiting me out.

"Figured you might have got hung up somewhere. Anyways, I didn't have nothing else planned tonight."

Or any night, I suspected.

"How's the wife?"

He shrugged. "Left me two years ago."

"Sorry to hear that."

"My fault. She couldn't—"

"You fellas need anything?" Our waitress, a skinny brunette, wore a skimpy black dress and a red checkerboard apron.

"Bring my friend another Pabst," I told her. "And I'll have a grilled cheese, fries, and a beer of the same name." I turned back to Bill. "You want to eat?"

"Grilled cheese and fries sounds fine."

The waitress disappeared into the cigarette fog.

"You working?" I asked Bill, then felt an embarrassed flush at the unintended cruelty.

"Here and there. Auto repairs mostly. Never went back to aviation. The CAA's lifting my license killed that."

"I've always felt you were had, Bill."

"Good of you to say that, but naw, I did myself in with that smart-ass comment to Meehan about 'who checks seat belts.' I shouldn't have said it, but he pissed me off questioning me like that."

"He was kinda panicked, Bill. We all were."

"Yeah. Well, after that, it was all downhill for me. What bugs me is that it was just flip talk. Too late I remembered I had checked that seat belt the day before. It was okay. But nobody at the trial believed that."

"I do, Bill." Then I told him about my conversation in Ludlum's Kosy Kafe.

"Sweet Jesus," he breathed when I finished. "That backs up something I've stumbled onto."

"And what might that be?"

Bill's rheumy eyes held mine, then broke away when the waitress came back to clunk down our order.

He took a swallow from the fresh bottle, set it down with exaggerated care, swept an imaginary crumb off the cracked pink plastic tabletop.

"I brought something to show you, then I decided not to. Afraid you'd think I was just an old has-been pitying himself about a lost past. But after what you just told me, I think you'll find it kinda interesting."

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a newspaper clipping. "This is outta the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. They carry a section on news from the rest of the state. Ran this a couple months ago."

He handed me the clip, heavily creased, as if he'd reread it a dozen times.

TEN-YEAR-OLD SAVES HER OLDER BROTHER

WESTON TOWNSHIP, APRIL 22—Ten-year-old Melissa Brighton saved her brother Terrence, fifteen, from drowning yesterday in tiny Lonesome Pond, when his air hose separated from his makeshift diving mask.

The two children were trying out an underwater "treasure magnet" Terrence had built, using a surplus WWII mine detector.

"I was in big trouble," Terrence admitted, "until Melissa

swam down and stuck the air hose back on."

"The boy had become confused," Weston volunteer fireman Cecil Norton stated, "and I don't doubt that he would have drowned except for Melissa's help."

"It wasn't worth it," Terrence admitted later. "All we brought up was a couple of rusty tin cans and an old rasp file."

I set the clipping on the table and stared at Bill.

"Trouble is," he said, "none of what you told me or this—" he gestured at the clipping—"would hold up in court. It's too late, anyway. The airport closed last year."

"I heard."

"I don't even know where Marty Meehan might be. It's too late for anything to be done."

"Not quite," I told him. "Could I somehow get a photostat made of this?"

"You can have it. I'll just try to forget the whole thing. Nobody can do anything now. It's over."

"Not quite, Bill." I reached out and shook his hand. "Not quite."

It took awhile, but I found Alec Wharton. After a whole lot of phone calls—the Veterans Administration was the most help—and a bit of dumb luck, I located him in New Jersey. No record of marriage; still a loner.

I had a week's vacation coming, took it, and drove due east across the Garden State.

I crossed Barnegat Bay on a rainy September afternoon, then

drove along the arrow-straight highway, up the middle of that long forty-mile spit of land that separates the bay from the Atlantic. Around five P.M., I spotted the water tower marked LAVALLETTE. This was a summer-season town, now mostly deserted, but I figured Wharton would still be here. I'd learned he was a draftsman in Lavallette's minuscule planning department.

The address I had put him in a little cedar-shingled beach cottage. I pulled up at the sandy end of the macadam side road, parked next to a low-slung green Studebaker, walked in the rain along duckboards to the weather-bleached front door. No bell. I knocked. Nothing. Knocked louder. He should have been home from work by now. Wasn't that his car out—

The door creaked open.

"Yeah? What can I—Hell, you can't be, uh, George . . . Nichols, wasn't it?"

"Still is, Alec. You're looking tanned and fit. A little gray, though. I shouldn't wonder."

"What's that mean?"

"Ask me in and I'll tell you."

"Uh, sure."

We sat in front of a big window that looked out on the beach and the surf beyond, wind-spumed and ominous. A perfect setting for what I was about to do. He hadn't offered me a drink, just a chair. Grudgingly.

"What in God's name brings you to Lavallette, of all places?"

"You do, Alec."

"I don't follow."

"I think you will. You had every-

one fooled. Cost Joe Pritchett his life. Cost Bill Collins his career and probably his wife. And, damn it, I was never the same after that day, myself. Been haunted by it for years."

"Yeah, me too. I can't forget it." He stared out at the thrashing waves. "Can't forget it," he repeated.

"And I'm here to make sure you never will, Alec."

Now he looked at me with some sixth sense warning him I wasn't here on any mercy mission.

"Let me get straight to the point. After the incident with your sister—"

Now I really had his attention.

"—you tracked Joe Pritchett to Hardington, probably through the CAA licensing division. Then you blitzed through the private pilot course with me so you could get to fly with him in the open cockpit PT-19."

"I don't see where any of this—"

"Check me on this: Students flew solo in the rear cockpit of that plane, but in the front cockpit with an instructor. The instructor sat aft."

"I know all that. What are you—"

"The day Pritchett died, you took off solo in the rear cockpit, knowing Pritchett would be in that cockpit on your next flight. And when he was—"

"He looped the plane and the seat belt broke and he fell out. Everybody knows what happened, Nichols. It was an *accident*."

"I don't think so. One, Pritchett was a disciplined flight instructor. He wouldn't have suddenly decided to play loop-the-loop with a student

and no chutes. Two, Collins checked the rear seat belt the day before, and it was fine."

"In Meehan's office, he said—"

"He thought better of that too late. Let me tell you my take on this. You flew off solo to practice stalls. You didn't practice any stalls, Alec. You spent that time sawing away at your seat belt—which would be Pritchett's seat belt on your next flight."

"Ridiculous! How would I know he was going to try a loop?"

"I doubt there ever was a loop. At three thousand feet, you whipped the plane inverted, probably gave it a shot of forward stick to treat Joe to heavy Gs, and the strain popped the weakened belt."

Alec smiled, but his eyes weren't in it. "So what did I do with that saw? You know I had nothing on me when I came back alone."

"It wasn't a saw, Alec. And you were too slick to bring it back. You remember that one farmer who saw the PT-19 make a low pass over Lonesome Pond?"

"That was me, looking for Pritchett's body."

"It was you, all right, but you weren't looking for Pritchett. He didn't fall out until after midday. The farmer swore you flew low over Lonesome Pond at eleven thirty."

"Why would I do that?"

I reached in my jacket pocket and handed him the clipping Bill Collins had saved. Watched Alec Wharton's tanned face drain to sickly gray.

"You flew low over Lonesome Pond to throw out that rasp."

"Everything you're saying . . . it's nothing but a guess," he managed.

"Yeah," I said. "Better than your guess, though, that Joe was guilty. Maybe he was, but how closely did you question your sister?"

I didn't wait for an answer. I stood up and leaned over him. "You can keep the clipping. Put it in your scrapbook."

"What are you going to—"

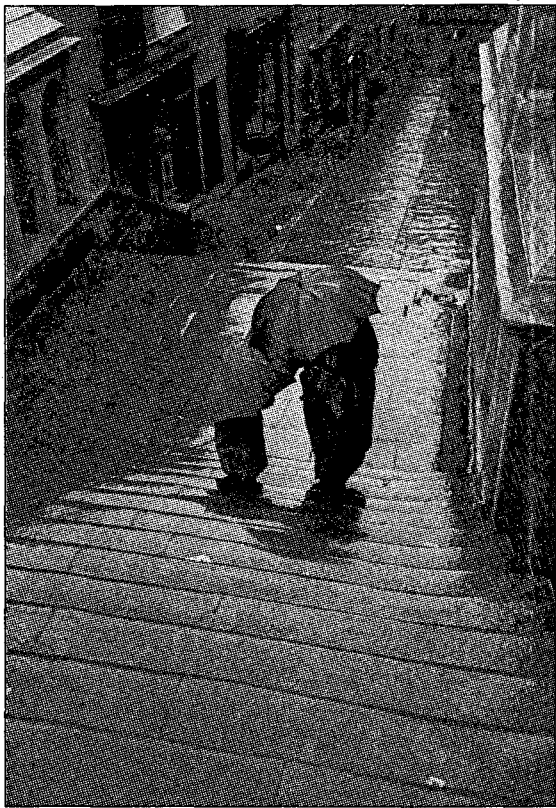
"I think it's up to you, Alec."

"What the hell do you expect me to do?"

I walked to the door, then turned back. "What do I expect you to do? Sweat, Alec. I expect you to sweat."

Note to Our Readers: If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

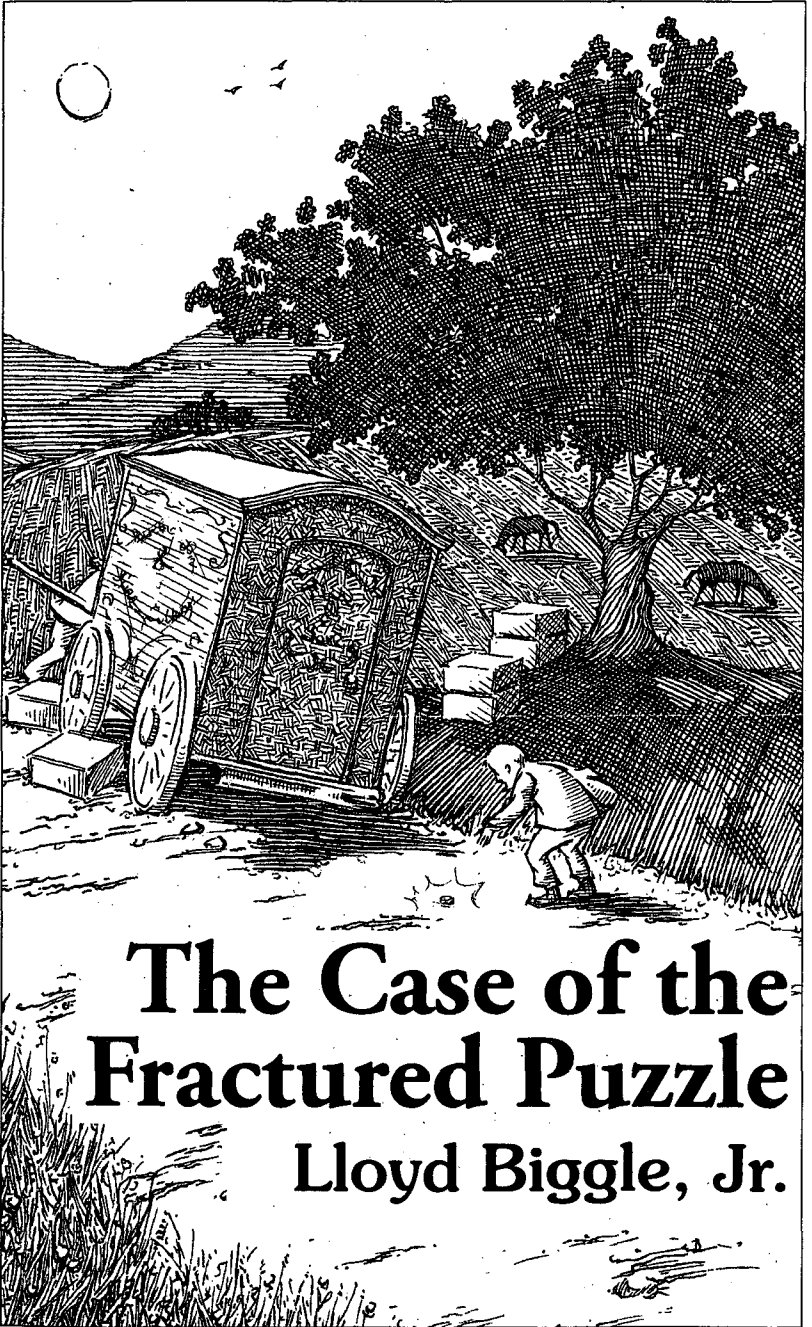
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archives


... 36 ... 37 ... 38 ... We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 142.



The Case of the Fractured Puzzle

Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

I returned to Connaught Mews from an errand to find my employer, Lady Sara Varnley, in serious conversation with a visitor. I knew the conversation was serious because they were speaking French. They were seated at the large conference table in the center of Lady Sara's study, and they appeared to be discussing, of all things, the enormous cribbage board that ornamented the center of the table. The board had been built to the order of Lady Sara's father, the deceased Earl of Ranisford, for a special six-handed game of cribbage that he invented. Lady Sara used it to record her progress in the criminal cases she was investigating. It could handle six investigations simultaneously.

At the moment she had no cases in hand, but she seemed to be using the board to illustrate the points she was making. Both of them politely reverted to English when I entered, and Lady Sara introduced us: "This is Colin Quick, my assistant. Colin, this is Monsieur Octave Henri Adeodat Hamard, Chef de la Sûreté Parisienne."

M. Hamard got to his feet, greeted me with a smile, and politely shook my hand. A dapper, slightly-built man in his forties with a charming little moustache, he looked far too handsome and too fragile to be a police officer, but he had the reputation of being almost excessively brave. When his men had a dangerous raid to perform, their chef was certain to lead the way.

"Monsieur Hamard is concerned with the stolen gold," Lady Sara

said—giving his presence there an entirely unnecessary explanation. At that moment, all French police officers were concerned with the stolen gold, and according to Lady Sara's best inside information, they were going to go right on being concerned with it to the end of time. The Bank of France had received an embarrassing quantity of bullion that it had no storage space for. Where the gold came from, or why, seemed to be state secrets; the French were not saying. In any event, the gold, amounting to some four hundred kilograms—a bit more than two fifths of a ton—had been stored temporarily in a branch of the Banque de l'Ouest in Rouen. It was an enormous amount of gold no matter what measuring system was used.

It was, in actual fact, a preposterous amount of gold, and how the thieves managed to learn it was there, break into the Banque de l'Ouest branch, load that much bullion into wagons, haul it away from the bank, and then spirit it out of France—if, in fact, they had done so—with no one noticing, were subjects that would occupy the French police for years to come. According to rumored inside information, it was done by tunneling, and the bullion had been removed on successive nights from the back of the vault in such a skillful fashion that the vault appeared to be undisturbed until suddenly—poof!—all the gold was gone.

The most urgent concern of the French police was, of course, to get the gold back. England came into it because the few thieves who had

been identified were English, the members of a gang of coiners that was well known on this side of the Channel. As a result, Scotland Yard was entertaining so many French visitors that French had become a second language there. It only figured that sooner or later the French authorities would find their way to Connaught Mews, where Lady Sara, England's most brilliant detective, had her headquarters.

I was studying the cribbage board. The pegs were arranged in a pattern that made no sense at all to me.

"I have been explaining the difficulties that face us," Lady Sara said. "What we have is a totally fractured puzzle. Clearly it is impossible to reassemble it, but we must accept the challenge or give up the game."

M. Hamard nodded gloomily.

"To begin with," Lady Sara continued, "there is the setting in France and all of its complications. The bank, how the criminals found out about the gold, how they broke in, and so on, right up to the point where they hauled the gold away—those questions belong to the case's wasted history. Even if you knew all of the answers, they would not lead you to where the gold is now unless, along the way, you chanced to identify more of the gang concerned and discover their present whereabouts. *That* information might possibly be helpful, and surely the French police are continuing to search for it."

M. Hamard nodded again.

"So we won't clutter our board

with any of that. We have no idea where the criminals are—perhaps still in France, perhaps in England, perhaps anywhere. And we have no idea whether the gold is with them or cached somewhere while they wait for the hue and cry to die down.

"In short, the investigation has no beginning. As I already mentioned, we are in the position of having to assemble a puzzle that has been so severely fractured that the event left no pieces. It is sometimes possible to reconstruct an entire picture from very little, but I have never before been asked to do it from nothing at all."

"You have no suggestions?" M. Hamard asked.

"Find me a few pieces—or even one piece—and perhaps I will be able to tell you something."

There was more talk, but when M. Hamard left, the picture was still shattered.

Thus we missed, for the time being, the opportunity to search for French gold, but Lady Sara managed to keep furiously busy without that, usually with trivialities but occasionally with a serious case. Several months passed, and nothing more was heard of the fractured French puzzle. Rumor now had it that the thieves had melted down the gold and recast it in some unrecognizable form—a considerable task for that much gold and not one to be undertaken in someone's kitchen.

Summer arrived, hot and humid, and as the trivialities multiplied, I began longing for a case that would

take us out of London for a few days.

Then, amidst a long run of charwomen, street-crossing sweepers, and costermongers who came to bring Lady Sara's attention to small oddities that were, to them, earth-shattering problems, we had a genuinely unusual visitor.

Charles Tupper, one of Lady Sara's two footmen, brought in his card with almost ceremonial formality. Lady Sara glanced at it, leaped to her feet, and exclaimed, "Good Heavens! Bring him in at once!"

From her reaction, I expected a celebrity or at least a well-known politician, and the elderly man whom Charles escorted in was a disappointment to me—small and slight and in no way remarkable except for his massive head, which was thatched with unruly thick, white hair that made him look top-heavy. He also wore a neatly pointed white beard. He was conservatively but not expensively dressed, and his innate dignity was impressive. He might have been the elderly prime minister of some Ruritanian state.

Lady Sara shook his hand warmly and then brought him across the room and presented him to me.

"Colin, this is Sherwin Venner. In my youth, his books gave me indescribable pleasure."

"Well, now!" In contradiction to his slight stature, Venner had a deep, vibrant bass voice. "Well, now! In your *youth*?" He chuckled. "That couldn't have been so *very* long ago!"

Lady Sara laughed merrily.

"Would you believe—at about the age of ten, I wrote a dramatic version of *Rawnsley* and produced it. My brother, who is now Earl of Ranisford, played the part of the villainous Creighton and was a huge success. We performed it for the children of my parents' friends. The adults who chanced to be present insisted on another performance for the children's parents, and that second performance actually went better than the first. The playwright took a full dozen curtain calls. At that moment, the only thing I wanted in life was to be another Sherwin Venner!"

Venner joined in her laughter. "Alas, *Rawnsley* was my one genuine success."

"Really? But I have at least a dozen of your books!"

"Oh, I continued to write, and with the success of *Rawnsley* behind me, to publish. But none of the succeeding novels sold well. And none of them were, like *Rawnsley*, successfully adapted for the theatre. *Rawnsley* was an even greater success as a drama than it had been as a book."

"Oh, dear!" Lady Sara looked genuinely distressed. "It never occurred to me at the time. I should have paid you royalties for my adaptation!"

"Indeed!" Venner's eyes twinkled. "I came to ask a favor. I had no idea that I could collect a debt instead!"

"You may, indeed," Lady Sara said. "I'm simply astonished that—well—"

"I know. You're astonished that I am still alive. My one great success is so far behind me that everyone

thinks I'm dead. But old authors never die. They just get graver and graver."

Lady Sara laughed again, got Venner seated, and rang for coffee. When the three of us had been served and the maid had left, she turned expectantly to Venner. "Your story, please. And I'll be disappointed if it's an ordinary one."

"Far too ordinary, I'm afraid," Venner said sadly. "As for myself, I am in need of nothing. My publisher was a wise man and a good friend. When *Rawnsley* was earning huge sums of money, he warned me that both fate and the public are fickle. 'It may never happen again,' he said. 'One success in a lifetime may be your allotment. Savour it! Few men are vouchsafed even one. Above all, don't squander the money. Invest it in something that will last.' I bought a farm in Kent. It has supported me in bad times and been a place of refuge in good times. After *Rawnsley*, the bad times outnumbered the good. But my story isn't important. I'm here about my son David, who was a harum-scarum lad, not interested in education or a profession. He became a wanderer—the lowest type of street entertainer, I fear. Years would pass without my receiving a word from him unless his need for money became truly desperate. Now he is in gaol in Oxford, charged with murder."

"Is he guilty?" Lady Sara asked.

"He says he isn't, and I believe him. He's never been a liar. Neither has he ever performed a violent act that I am aware of. But the police claim to have evidence."

"What sort of evidence?" Lady Sara wanted to know.

"A stone. A London paving stone, they say it is. An old lady was bashed on the head with it."

"What is there that connects the murder weapon with your son?"

"He is a stone cracker. That is the entertainment he performs. He cracks stones—hits the stones with his fist as though his fist were a hammer. He always carries a bag of stones, you see, so as to have a stone of the right size available when there is a chance for a performance. When the police found a piece of London paving stone in his bag, and the old lady was killed with a piece of London paving stone, and David was known to have passed through the village of Wrockly, where the murder occurred, about the time of the murder, they didn't bother to search any further. The outlook does indeed seem black for him."

"The problem with the police," Lady Sara said, "is that they always have some excuse or other for not looking further." She turned to me. "Oxford. We will take Rick and Charles with us. Would you make the arrangements, please?"

Her footmen, Rick Allward and Charles Tupper, were both highly competent investigators.

There were three ways of reaching Oxford from London—by road, by rail, or by boat. The journey by rail from Paddington Station was quickest and most comfortable, taking anywhere from one to slightly more than two hours depending on the train.

Venner did not accompany us.

He had just come from Oxford; he had no desire to see his son in prison a second time. I had no doubt that David had been a sore disappointment to him, and now the younger man's life seemed poised to end in high tragedy.

But perhaps not. The police evidence Venner described did not impress me. One of London's paving stones had always seemed very like another, and also remarkably similar to paving stones from other places.

Sherwin Venner gave us all the information he had before we parted. It turned out that he knew very little, and he assured us that David would be unable to add much to that. David had been traveling in the west of England, visiting small towns on their market days when audiences were available that might toss him a few coins for his stone-cracking. The coins had got fewer and fewer, so he decided to head east and join a troop of Gypsies he was friendly with. He had traveled with them before, earning his keep by helping them with chores of various kinds and performing his stone-cracking for the crowds they attracted. Something in his wild nature matched their love of the road, and he considered them good friends. He arranged by mail to meet them in Oxfordshire.

In Gloucester he fell in with a tradesman who dealt in cutlery, a Mr. Marvin Ruckler, who was traveling to London by way of Oxford. They struck a deal—David Venner watched the tradesman's van and horse while he made calls, ran errands for him, and attracted an au-

dience for him by performing his act in front of local shops that sold cutlery. Ruckler would then demonstrate his knives and try to make sales for the local merchant, who profited both from the publicity and from the sales. They journeyed east in a leisurely fashion, with no large successes but enough business to encourage the tradesman. Ruckler paid all their expenses. David would have been willing to sleep in the van—or in a convenient straw stack; he was accustomed to worse accommodation—but while they were associated, Ruckler insisted on providing a bed for him.

By the time they approached Oxford, however, the tradesman had decided he needed a better act than David's stone-cracking. According to David, they had done two promotions in the city of Oxford, and the police had found witnesses who remembered them. They left Oxford late in the afternoon. A short distance beyond it they passed through the small town of Wrockly, and several miles beyond that, they overtook the caravan of David's Gypsy friends, where he took his leave of the tradesman. They had a friendly parting, he said.

According to Ruckler's recollections—the police had interviewed him several days later—he had dropped David off just before they reached the town of Wrockly, not several miles past it. On the basis of this evidence, David would have been passing through Wrockly on foot about nightfall when the murder occurred. As the police reconstructed the crime, David glanced

through a lighted window and saw Christabel Doblitz, a widowed shopkeeper who lived in the rear of her shop, counting her day's take. He forced his way in through the rear door, bashed her head with one of his stones, and stole the money. They considered it a simple case.

Ruckler had no special bias against David, Venner thought. When he learned that his testimony had got David charged with murder, he engaged an Oxford solicitor to make certain David received a fair trial.

At that point, both Lady Sara and I were full of objections, but Venner could tell us nothing more. Perhaps the police had witnesses and evidence he knew nothing about that made their case far better than it sounded. We would find out when we got to Oxford.

On arrival, we rented two traps. Rick and Charles took one and headed for the village of Wrockly to see if more witnesses could be found. Lady Sara and I drove our trap to the prison, a cramped and dismal place near the castle. It had been a prison since the thirteenth century, complete with gallows and a convenient courthouse. Prison reformers would have got rid of it quickly in London, mere confinement there being enough to break a man's spirit.

Lady Sara had telephoned Chief Inspector Mewer of the Metropolitan Police before we left, and he had cleared the way for us with a telegram. We were met at the prison by a Sergeant Ostler of the County Police. He conveyed the respects of the chief constable of Ox-

fordshire and declared himself willing to do whatever he could to assist Lady Sara. With the sergeant, we called on David Venner. He was at home—in a cramped cell—and available.

David Venner had very little spirit to break. He was a shaggy, ratlike man with a long, untrimmed beard and ragged clothing, and it was easy to understand why the police had immediately seized upon him as their principal suspect. Lady Sara informed him that his father had asked her to do what she could for him. He nodded glumly.

As for his story, he acted and looked dumbfounded at the charge. He had never set foot in Wrockly, he said. He hadn't even known where the village was until the police had told him. When he drove through it in the tradesman's cart, he hadn't known its name. He had no idea why Mr. Ruckler claimed to have put him down west of the village. They had driven straight through it and some distance beyond, stopping near the Gypsy encampment, which was in a dell near the road. He had exchanged farewells with Ruckler and climbed out of the van, waved once more, and turned to greet his old friends, the Gypsies. From that moment, he was always in the company of one or several of them.

We took our leave of him, promising to see him again soon. Hopefully, there would be good news for him. Outside, Sergeant Ostler shook his head gravely. "He sticks to his story," he said.

"What is wrong with it?" Lady Sara asked. "He certainly should

have enough witnesses if he is telling the truth—an entire troop of Gypsies.”

“Gypsies are a notoriously untrustworthy people,” the sergeant said. “You can hardly expect the police—or a jury—to accept their word as opposed to that of a well-established merchant of excellent character. Ruckler is a partner in the London firm of Ruckler and Son, Fine Cutlery. Also, he was rather fond of David Venner. He felt that he had to tell the truth about where they parted, but, having done so, he engaged a solicitor for him.”

“What is this nonsense about paving stones?” Lady Sara demanded.

“We turned the murder weapon over to geologists at the University. They called it grey Guernsey granite, and it was identical to one of the stones in David’s bag. Many London paving stones are the same type of rock.”

“Have you checked to see how many Oxford paving stones are of the same type of rock?” Lady Sara asked.

“Well, no—”

“Or Bristol paving stones, or Manchester paving stones? Or, for that matter, Wrockly paving stones? Stones can be picked up anywhere. David Venner was carrying stones of the precise size and type he needed for cracking. Are the police going to testify that the murder weapon was precisely the same size and weight as the stones Venner was carrying?”

“About that, I don’t know.”

“I suggest that if we searched for

stones in the Widow Doblit’s backyard, we might find another example of grey Guernsey granite, which I take it refers to a type that is found rather widely. Any stones used in great numbers, as paving stones are, will be rather common rocks. I think we can safely write off the one in David Venner’s bag as a coincidence.”

“You may be right about that, but Venner didn’t mention to you what else we found in his pocket.”

Lady Sara cocked her head and waited.

“A gold sovereign, recently minted. The Widow Doblit converted her small savings into gold sovereigns whenever she could. She may have had as many as ten or twelve hidden in her house. A neighbouring shopkeeper who does her banking for her in Oxford had brought one back to her that very day—a recently minted sovereign, she was very particular about that. So of course that sovereign was part of the loot.”

“What did Venner have to say about it?”

“He said he found it in the road. The others the widow was saving have disappeared, so Venner probably stole them, too.”

“Where are they?” Lady Sara asked quickly.

“No doubt he hid them somewhere. But we arrested him with one in his pocket, and that one will hang him.”

The sergeant accompanied us to Wrockly, where we met a grinning Rick Allward and Charles Tupper. They had found not one but several witnesses who clearly remem-

bered seeing the tradesman's van labeled RUCKLER & SON, FINE CUTLERY drive through Wrockly on the day of the murder with the natty Ruckler on the box and an extremely shabby-looking man beside him. The day was memorable because of the murder, and all of the witnesses were positive in their testimony.

Their evidence must have been a blow to the sergeant, but he gravely interviewed the witnesses himself and took down their statements.

"Venner easily could have returned to Wrockly that evening," the sergeant said. "There's still the sovereign to account for."

We returned to Oxford for another interview with David Venner. "I'm interested in your travels with Marvin Ruckler," Lady Sara said. "I want to know the names of all the towns and villages you visited. And I want all the details you can remember about finding that sovereign."

Venner fumbled about confusedly—he had a notoriously poor memory, which perhaps explained his failure to acquire an education. He finally managed to provide enough names for us to lay out their route on a map.

His recollection of finding the sovereign was much clearer. Probably there had been very few sovereigns in his life, and each of them was memorable. "It was right after the accident," he said.

Lady Sara pounced. "Let's hear all about the accident first."

Venner guessed it wasn't really much of an accident. A fox had sud-

denly darted across the road, directly in front of the horses. The horses were unusually large, spirited beasts, and they reared. The van veered sharply to one side, a wheel ran off the road into the ditch, and part of the bottom broke out of the van. Ruckler had sent him to find a new board somewhere so he could make repairs. Venner located a nearby farmer who chanced to have some pieces of lumber, and the farmer brought them in a cart and sold Ruckler what he needed. Ruckler and David had to partially unload the van—those cartons of knives were heavy!—and Ruckler, who carried a kit of tools in the van, made his own repairs. There wasn't much for Venner to do but wait, and he had done so, making himself comfortable in the shade of a large oak tree. While he was sitting there, he had noticed something glittery in the road, and it was the sovereign.

After the repairs were completed, they reloaded the van and continued on their way.

Anyone hearing him stammer through that story should have believed him. He simply did not have the mental adroitness to invent something like that.

Having got as much information as we could, we went directly from the jail to the office of the solicitor Ruckler had engaged for David. That gentleman had known neither Ruckler nor David; he was simply concerned with doing the best he could for the accused man. The solicitor took us to see an elderly, distinguished-looking barrister *he* had engaged, and the two of

them discussed the case with us with much head shaking.

They were grateful for the new witnesses, but they doubted that these would be of much help. "It won't matter which side of the village Ruckler put Venner down on," the barrister said. "The jury will reason that he walked back and brought a Gypsy friend with him as lookout. The stone—we can get around the stone easily enough. All that talk about different kinds of stones will confuse the jury, whose members already know that a great variety of stones can be found almost anywhere. Venner didn't need to bring one—that was an accident due to his profession. He could have picked one up along the way to break into the house. It is the sovereign that is damning. The jury will be able to tell just by looking at David Venner that any sovereign in his possession wasn't acquired honestly. Too bad it wasn't a sixpence. That would be believable."

Lady Sara was unusually quiet on the way back to London. When we reached Connaught Mews, she called me into her study for a conference. "In the French case, we were handed the job of putting together a picture with no pieces," she said. "In this case, there are too many pieces, and they form too many pictures. The jury probably will accept the wrong one and hang our client. There is very little we can do except try to find *another* tramp who was passing through Wrockly on that particular evening."

"How about a neighbour who

was badly in need of money?" I suggested.

"There's not much likelihood of either, but it's our only chance. I'll send Rick and Charles back to Wrockly tomorrow to make a thorough search."

Rick and Charles began their digging, but before they had any results worth contemplating, the Eastbourne police handed the Oxfordshire police and also the Venner family a completely unexpected gift. Noticing a youth of sixteen or seventeen spending money recklessly, they arrested him for questioning. His answers were evasive, so they searched him and his lodgings. They found a handful of gold sovereigns. Forceful questioning produced a confession. He had been visiting his aunt, who lived near the Widow Doblit in Wrockly. Wandering about one evening, looking for something interesting to do, he had chanced to glance into the window of the Widow Doblit's back room. She was counting her money. He picked up a rock in the backyard, just as Lady Sara had theorized, broke in, and killed her. The next day there was a turmoil about the murder, but no one suspected him, and he left that same day for Eastbourne.

He had no regrets about the widow, the Eastbourne police remarked, but he was extremely remorseful about being caught. Right up to that moment, he'd had a riot of fun. He hadn't realized what a difference a little money made in one's life.

When David Venner was released from jail, he and his father,

the once-famous author, called on us together. David Venner had visited both a barber and a tailor, and he looked transformed.

Sherwin Venner wanted to know what he owed Lady Sara.

"It wasn't my doing," she said with a smile. "The Eastbourne police solved the case. Anyway, you paid my bill years ago."

"But you must have had expenses!" Venner protested.

"All paid," Lady Sara said. "If I'm satisfied, you should be. He is well paid that is well satisfied. However, David's account does have a small unpaid balance."

"I'll pay it for him now," Venner announced.

"No. Only David can settle it. For one thing, I am curious about this profession of stone cracker. I have never seen that done. Would you demonstrate, please?"

David Venner was reluctant. He had vowed to put all of that behind him, and he had thrown his bag of stones away. But since Lady Sara was interested, he searched about Connaught Mews for a suitable rock, found one—"very like a paving stone," he said—and gave us a demonstration. He placed it on a board and suddenly brought his closed fist down upon the stone. The stone cracked as though his fist were an iron hammer.

We examined his fist. The portion of his hand that struck the stone was developed into a horn-like mass. Otherwise, his arm seemed no better developed than average. Obviously there was some trick to the procedure that we could not discern.

"One thing more," Lady Sara said. "I would very much like to have that sovereign that almost hanged you. I'll use it for a souvenir to remind me of how deceptive appearances can be. I'll give you another to replace it."

"You are most welcome to it," David said. "I'll be pleased not to see it again. I'm going to my father's farm in Kent to learn to be a farmer. It is true that a wanderer gathers no moss—just a bit of gold that may hang him."

The two left happily, leaving Lady Sara in possession of the sovereign. It could serve as a reminder not only of the Venner case, but of another that was equally unsatisfactory. The French gold was still missing.

We returned to our routine—an occasional important case amidst an unending procession of trivialities. A month passed, and then we had two important callers. Chief Inspector Mewer of the Metropolitan Police, who was Lady Sara's official contact there, and M. Octave Hamard, the Chef de la Sûreté Parisienne. M. Hamard did not look any happier than he had the last time he called.

The two men were a study in contrasts: The chief inspector a burly Gibraltar of a man who was born dowdy looking; and the small, dapper, meticulously turned out Frenchman.

Lady Sara greeted both of them warmly. She, too, sometimes tired of trivialities, and these two represented what easily could have been the most important case of the dec-

ade. "Have you found any pieces of the puzzle?" she asked M. Hamard.

"Actually, we have," M. Hamard confessed. "Unfortunately, the picture remains, as you called it, fractured, but we thought we would see whether the pieces mean anything to you."

Chief Inspector Mewer took over the conversation. Obviously the newly discovered pieces were his pieces. "A man who has been identified as one of the bank thieves has been seen in Fort William, far up in Scotland. This is Gerald Brodie, who was apprenticed to a gold and silversmith in Glasgow before he turned to crime. He was recognized in Fort William by a Scotland Yard detective who had gone north on the track of a murderer. Unfortunately, the detective had to decide whether to arrest his murderer, for whom he had a warrant, or attempt to follow Brodie, whose only crime, as far as he knew, was that he was in France when the gold was stolen. He arrested the murderer, but he also reported sighting Brodie in what seemed like an odd location."

"But perhaps not so odd," M. Hamard interposed, "if he were merely seeking a remote and quiet place to hide for a time."

Lady Sara nodded at me, and I went for a large-scale map of Britain. I moved the massive cribbage board aside and spread the map out on the conference table. Fort William was more than halfway up the west coast of Scotland, and it looked remote enough to me. If an absconding bank robber were able to merge with his surround-

ings—if he were Scottish, for example, which Brodie certainly was—he probably felt as secure there as he would anywhere.

"An excellent beginning," Lady Sara said. "What else do you have?"

"Only one thing more," Chief Inspector Mewer said. "Just yesterday, Edward Luffton, whom we think was a high-ranking member of the gang, was seen in Bristol. He comes from the Exmoor area himself, so perhaps it isn't strange that he has gone to roost there. So we have two small facts that may not mean anything more than what we deduced weeks ago—that the members of the gang have scattered and are hiding out and waiting for the hue and cry to die down. But we thought we would see how they look to you."

Lady Sara was smiling radiantly. "I am pleased that you did, for I have turned up a fact of my own, and until this moment I wasn't certain how it fitted in. Now I know. As I told you last time, Monsieur Hamard, it is sometimes possible to construct a picture from very little, and our three small facts taken together—your two facts and my one—are as much as I needed."

"What is this one fact that you have?" the chief inspector asked.

Lady Sara went to her desk and returned with the gold sovereign David Venner had plucked out of the road somewhere in the West.

The two police officers gave it their puzzled scrutiny. In turn they examined it, held it up to the light, finally shook their heads.

"It is an ordinary sovereign, minted only last year," Chief In-

spector Mewer remarked. "Except for what looks like a small chip missing, it is in practically mint condition."

"It is anything but ordinary," Lady Sara said. "For one thing, it's counterfeit."

M. Hamard reached for the coin again. "I would swear this is genuine gold."

"It is genuine gold," Lady Sara said. "Even so, it has been examined and the missing chip has been analyzed at the Royal Mint, and the officials there certify that it is counterfeit. They also certify that it is a slightly purer grade of gold than a genuine sovereign."

Both men were staring at her. M. Hamard exclaimed, "You English certainly have your peculiarities. What possible profit could there be for a counterfeiter who used purer gold than the genuine coins?"

"First, let me reconstruct the picture for you," Lady Sara said. She turned to the map. "As you can readily see, the west coast of Scotland, north and south of Fort William, is a maze of islands and long sea inlets, the lochs." She pointed to the area she was describing. "The land is appallingly empty, but the landing places it provides are far more sheltered than an open coast would be. It would be possible to unload four hundred kilograms of gold there without anyone noticing.

"Once this has been done, however, the gang faces a formidable problem—because the gold is worthless unless it can be got to a place where it can be converted into goods and services the gang needs or desires. There is very little

of that in northern Scotland, where inhabitants may live their lives out without ever seeing a gold coin.

"This brings us to the second piece of our puzzle. A member of the gang was seen in Bristol. That location has two interesting features. For one, along the lengthy Bristol Channel and the mouth of the Severn all the way up to Gloucester, there are many sheltered and sparsely populated places where small boats could land undetected. For another, the area northeast of Bristol, because of the long inlet provided by the Bristol Channel and the Severn, is far closer to London than any other place on the west coast of England. The distance from Liverpool to London, for example, would be almost twice as far as the distance from Gloucester to London.


"Putting these facts together, we suddenly have the picture of a plan."

M. Hamard had been listening politely. Now he started and leaned forward. "We do?"

"The gold has been landed in Scotland somewhere in that vast, sparsely populated area I showed you. It is being processed there. Then, in relatively small quantities, it is being landed in the Bristol-Gloucester area and transported to London."

"Transported how?" M. Hamard asked politely.

"Not by boat, surely. The route would be enormously long, and customs agents have the London Port well in hand. Not by train, I think, except for extremely small amounts—the quantity one could



carry in a pocket or, perhaps, sew into one's clothing. To a criminal, a train resembles a moving trap. Once in, he can't leave at will, and if he entered with a suspiciously heavy package, he would be subject to the questioning scrutiny of his fellow passengers during the entire journey. If one of them thought to bring him to the attention of a constable at any station the train stopped at, the game might be up. Remember, to transport that much gold would mean repeated trips, with the same gauntlet to run time after time. Other passengers ride the train regularly and would have repeated opportunities to hone their suspicions. So I think the gold will be transported to London by road."

"But what will they do with it when they get it here?" M. Hamard asked.

"Spend it!" Lady Sara said cheerfully. "They won't be bringing it in the form of bullion. You can't walk into a goldsmith's shop and sell a few pounds of gold. Even if the French identification marks have been removed, there would certainly be questions as to the gold's origin. And though the Bank of England is legally required to buy all the gold bullion submitted to it at a fixed price, any thief attempting to take advantage of this would surely arouse suspicious curiosity. An investigation would follow at once.

"They will have to convert it into a form that can be easily spent. What we have here is the most amazing counterfeiting operation in the history of crime. Counter-

feiters usually attempt to produce coins that have a far greater face value than the metal contained in them. That is how they derive their profit. These counterfeiters are producing gold sovereigns that are every bit as valuable as the sovereigns coined at the mint—maybe a bit more valuable, as my sample demonstrates. Why not? The counterfeiters have plenty of gold. They don't have to increase its value. All they want to do is put it into a form where it can be exchanged for the goods and services they want. In other words, to convert it into sovereigns so they can spend it. Last year, the Royal Mint coined more than eight hundred thousand sovereigns. This year, double that amount may be put into circulation, thanks to the gold thieves."

Both men were staring at her. "Diabolical!" Chief Inspector Mewer muttered. "But see here. An operation like that can't be carried on without leaving any traces, not even in Scotland."

"When they unloaded their four hundred kilograms of gold, they probably unloaded a few tons of coke at the same time. Coke burns with little or no smoke. It doesn't take a huge fire to melt gold. It doesn't take a huge fire to operate a small steam engine, which will give them all the power they need to run a coin press. With an unlimited amount of money, which they have, they can manage all that easily."

"You're deducing that entire, complicated history from only three things—members of a gang of coiners sighted in Port William and

Bristol, and a counterfeit sovereign found in the road somewhere," Chief Inspector Mewer complained.

"Ah! But you never thought to ask *where* it was found in the road and under what circumstances!"

They looked at her, waiting.

"It was found near a tradesman's van that had suffered an accident. It ran off the road; a board broke in the bottom and had to be replaced. Boxes of goods—described to me as extremely heavy—had to be shifted about so repairs could be made. Afterward, a counterfeit sovereign was found in the road. My deduction: Those extremely heavy boxes contained counterfeit sovereigns that were being transported to London. The jolt caused by running off the road made one or several cartons break through the bottom of the van, and one or more sovereigns fell out."

She described David Venner's experience with Mr. Marvin Ruckler, the commercial gentleman who was searching out customers for his wholesale cutlery business.

"Notice that he had unusually powerful horses, and even so, he made a suspiciously leisurely journey of it—so as to not put an unnecessary strain on the horses, of course. Notice, too, that Mr. Ruckler refused Venner's offer to sleep in his van. It would have made no difference to Venner, who was accustomed to sleeping anywhere he could. It would have saved the cost of a room each night. It would have been an extra measure of security for the van. But Ruckler didn't want to give Venner an opportuni-

ty to snoop around and learn something about his cargo.

"Further, after the accident, Ruckler was suspicious that Venner might have seen something, and when he learned of a murder in a village they had passed through, he tipped the police off to Venner's presence in the area and even lied about where he had parted with him to give them the impression that Venner had passed through the town of Wrockly at the time of the murder. Getting Venner hanged would have been a highly efficient way of getting rid of a possibly embarrassing witness."

"But you said he engaged a solicitor for David Venner."

"Why not? He has plenty of money, and it demonstrated to the police that he had nothing against Venner. It added to his credibility as a witness."

"But now the police know who Ruckler is, and they have his address," M. Hamard said. "It should be easy for them to—how do you say it?—come down on him and recover the gold."

"I doubt that he is foolish enough to keep the gold at a London address the police have, and any attempt to raid that address would cause the whole gang to dive for cover. The search for the gold would have to start over again."

"Couldn't the chief inspector get a warrant and search the van—and arrest this Ruckler person and confiscate the counterfeit gold coins?"

"The fact that a stone cracker found a gold sovereign in the road in western England may convince

us, but it isn't likely to convince a magistrate that you are justified in searching a respectable merchant's van. If it did, you would recover whatever gold he happened to have concealed in the van, and you would have one member of the gang in custody—but that is all. They would never bring gold to London that way again, and the other members of the gang would vanish a second time—along with what was left of the two-fifths of a ton of gold."

"So what are we to do?"

"We might attempt to introduce a new member into their gang. Unfortunately, any kind of an approach by a stranger would be regarded by them with deep suspicion. There is only one solution."

The two police officers leaned forward expectantly.

"We can't join them, so we will have to encourage them to join us," Lady Sara said placidly.

It was, I thought, by far the most pleasurable way to travel. I was lolling in semiboredom on the footboard of a sparkling new Reading caravan, the type of caravan built by the Duncan family of Reading and preferred to all others by England's Gypsies. Beside me, on the nearside of the footboard, was the caravan's driver, the celebrated Gypsy fortuneteller, Madam Zarno, who—in another incarnation—was Lady Sara Varnley, beautiful, brilliant, and wealthy sister of the Earl of Ranisford and an ornament to high society.

Now she wore brightly patterned

Gypsy robes and was bejewelled in the manner of Gypsy fortunetellers. We were one unit of a Gypsy convoy, traveling on the Cheltenham road and headed toward Oxford and London. Since haste had been a factor, Lady Sara's new caravan had been shipped by rail to Cheltenham, where a Gypsy troop consisting of longtime friends of hers had met it and us. Our journey had to be timed so that Mr. Marvin Ruckler and his cutlery van would overtake us on his next trip to London. Hopefully, he would soon do so. In anticipation of this, we moved toward Oxford at little more than walking pace, the usual speed for a Gypsy troop made up of several young foals and even a few goats. Further, we paused in every village along the way to sell items the troop had manufactured.

Lady Sara had not been facetious when she suggested encouraging the gold thieves to join us. One of her favourite disguises was membership in a Gypsy troop, and Gypsy blood is commonplace in the underworld. "All of the worst Romanies join the crooks," one Gypsy matron complained to me. This may have been why the members of both groups were so intensely superstitious. Many a thief would turn his back on a sure thing if the signs—or the time of day, or the day of the week—were inauspicious. Or if the first news vendor he met was selling the wrong paper. Or if the next street sweeper were a woman. Or if—fill in your own endless list of similar superstitions. Death, in any of its manifestations, was a bad luck sign throughout the

underworld. A vulnerable-appearing house might suddenly acquire immunity if it turned out that someone died there recently.

It remained to be seen whether the gold thieves shared the common traits of their class.

So there we were, on the main west-east highway, with scouts posted both north and south in the event that Ruckler changed his route. For all of our alertness, the cutlery van overtook us with startling suddenness. It passed us abruptly, approaching from the rear and driving at a smart clip along the entire length of the Gypsy convoy.

Ruckler's van was not a living van or caravan of the type the Gypsies used, but a tradesman's van, a vehicle being seen in ever increasing numbers in London. But even among tradesmen's vans, this was an oddity. It resembled a grocer's or baker's van, being a light wagon with wood sides and no windows, but its slightly curved roof had clerestories for added light and ventilation. It was painted a rich brown with yellow trim, colours no Gypsy would have tolerated. The van itself was an arresting sight, but its horses were far more startling. They were totally unsuitable for such a light vehicle, being large, heavy cobs that looked as though they could have hauled a brewer's dray.


As the van, with its neatly lettered sign, RUCKLER & SON, FINE CUTLERY, passed us, we had our first glimpse of Mr. Marvin Ruckler. Lady Sara appeared to pay the van no attention at all, even though its driver, a nattily dressed man with

a drooping moustache who wore the typical tie, cap, and dark suit of a commercial traveler, turned to stare at us. His passenger, a shabby-looking bearded man, also scrutinized us. As usual, Lady Sara managed to take it all in without seeming to. As soon as we saw the back of the van—it had a high tail-board for unloading—she turned to me.

"Are Rick and Charles alerted?"

I felt certain they would be, but I dropped off the moving caravan and headed toward the convoy's rear to check. I had taken only a few steps when they passed me on horseback, traveling in the van's wake. Rick Allward and Charles Tupper had been traveling at the rear of the convoy with Gypsy horse traders. Both of them grew up among horses in the English Midlands, and they took to these Gypsy excursions as if born to them. They even darkened their skin and rode without saddles. They were hurrying forward with two of their Gypsy friends, and the four of them waved as their horses pounded past.

Lady Sara had no difficulty in impersonating a Gypsy fortuneteller. Rick and Charles couldn't be distinguished from the other Gypsy horse traders. This left me with a considerable handicap. I was the only obvious *gorgio*, or non-Gypsy, in the troop, and we'd had to invent a reason for my being there. I wasn't pleased with what had been decided on, but Lady Sara considered it effective. I think it also amused her. I was supposed to be the *gorgio* suitor of a pretty Gypsy



girl of fifteen or so. Her father wasn't pleased with it, either, which made my position far more uncomfortable than it needed to be, but Lady Sara thought it a convincing touch. Gypsy fathers almost never cared for *gorgio* suitors for their daughters.

I returned to Lady Sara's caravan and swung aboard. "He gave some thought to his choice of a product," I told Lady Sara. "People would expect a van load of knives to be heavy. It provides an excuse for the powerful horses and the extra wide wheels."

She smiled. "I wondered whether you would notice the wheels. Actually, the structure of the van is unique. The van's box is below the floor. That's where he hides the gold, of course, and probably the van must be taken apart to unload it."

At a crossroad, one of the Gypsy horse traders was posted. He pointed north. Lady Sara consulted her map. "There are three villages in that direction, all of them good possibilities for him," she announced. "We will camp here."

The interior of Lady Sara's caravan was arranged according to her own specifications rather than those of a traditional Gypsy caravan. It had two regular-sized beds instead of one extremely wide bed. She had accepted Gypsy colours, however, so the caravan was painted bright red with a vibrant green trim.

The troop's caravans were quickly posted in a circle. Tents sprang up around them—a large one near Lady Sara's, to be occupied by Rick,

Charles, and me. Lady Sara shared her caravan with Fiona, the Gypsy girl who, in addition to being my alleged sweetheart, was also acting as Lady Sara's servant.

As the camp began to take shape, Lady Sara and I joined a small convoy that was to head north and keep an eye on Mr. Marvin Ruckler—more than an eye, if he permitted it. We found him in the first village, where his van was parked in front of a typical small-town general store. His passenger, who proved to be a shoddy purveyor of magic tricks, was already at work trying to attract a crowd. The Gypsies did a far better job of it. They wheeled in beside Ruckler's van and in no time at all the whole village had turned out.

We scrupulously avoided interfering with Mr. Ruckler's pitch, but the moment he finished—without selling any knives—the Gypsies began their own selling. Lady Sara, Madam Zarno, gave sweets to passing children, performed magic tricks for them, and told a few fortunes. Some Gypsies were selling blankets, or brushes, or baskets, or other items of their own manufacture. A few were offering small baskets of plums—we had passed a plum orchard early that morning. I was touting a finely woven basket.

Ruckler didn't know quite what to make of this scene. He scrutinized it perplexedly until finally his gaze fell on me. He intercepted me. "You're no Romany," he said. "What are you doing with this crowd?"

"I have a Romany sweetheart," I told him. "She makes baskets—

beautiful work, isn't it? Look at how meticulously it is woven—and I sell them."

He studied the basket. "How much?"

I had decided not to like his attitude. Lady Sara told me to treat him politely, but she hadn't said I couldn't pull his leg. "Ten pounds," I told him.

He stared at me in astonishment. "You aren't selling many baskets at that price."

"I hope to," I said. "Fiona's father doesn't like *gorgios*—that's the term for a non-Gypsy. But he might like one who can sell his daughter's baskets."

I think at that point he decided to pull my leg. "How about selling some knives for me?" he asked. "If you can sell a junk basket for ten pounds, you ought to be able to sell good-quality knives for a fair price."

"Glad to," I said. "But I have to sell the basket first."

He didn't hesitate. He took out a fat wallet, extracted a ten-pound note, and handed it to me. I gave him the basket.

"Now sell some knives for me," he said. He meant it as a challenge, and I took it the same way.

"Show me what you have," I suggested.

He took me over to the van and offered me a satchel containing fancy boxed sets of carving knives. "No, no," I told him. "That's for high society. It might do well in Oxford but not here. What else do you have?"

I selected half a dozen butcher knives. "These men are farmers. They always have a use for this

kind of thing. What's your best price?"

"Those are genuine high-quality knives. If I don't get fifteen shillings each, I lose money. You don't want the satchel? It'll make an impression on your customer."

"Not the sort of impression I want to make," I said.

I stowed the knives away about my oversized garments and looked over the crowd to select my first victim. I sidled up to a stout, red-faced farmer and said quietly, "Like to see a bargain in butcher knives?"

He sneered. "I'll bet. You Gypsies sell trash at the long price and call it a bargain."

"Not these knives. They're absolutely the best. They say 'Sheffield Warranted Steel' right on the blade." I produced a knife I'd been hiding up my sleeve. "You've never seen a better quality butcher knife," I told him.

It was difficult to say whether he was more impressed with the knife or the way I slipped it out of my sleeve. He examined it carefully. "How much?"

"A special bargain, today only. One pound." It was, in actual fact, a very good price. Probably a village merchant would have charged twice that.

He paid me a pound and took the knife. He was about to announce his purchase to a friend, but I patted him on the arm and hushed him. "I only have a few," I said.

I sold all of them. A bargain price on something a Gypsy pulls from his sleeve is much more attractive to a Midlands farmer than an al-

leged bargain in a village shop. Then I went back to the van, paid Ruckler, and got another half-dozen. I did this twice more before the crowd began to break up. I had six pounds of profit for my efforts. Ruckler had gotten rid of two dozen butcher knives.

We moved on to the next village. This time Ruckler made no attempt to promote a connection with a local merchant. His magician, plus the Gypsies, attracted a crowd, and he remained in the van and surreptitiously watched me sell knives. The same thing happened at the third village. When we returned to the Gypsy encampment, he trailed along. When Lady Sara saw him following after us, she experienced one of her rare genuine surprises.

"What *have* you been up to?" she demanded.

I explained that I was now a knife merchant and Mr. Marvin Ruckler was a genuine Gypsy. "What's the matter?" I asked. "You said we should encourage him to join us."

"I didn't expect him to swallow all the bait on the first cast," she said.

"Nor did I. As well as I can determine, he's cut a poor deal for himself with the cutlery business. He's been making no profit at all. My flutter with knives has fascinated him even though he's still making very little profit. Why?"

"Because it is important that he sell knives," Lady Sara said. "The more, the better. That's evidence that his is a legitimate business. When the police come snooping around—and he knows they will,

sooner or later—he wants to be able to show that he has legitimately bought and sold hundreds or thousands of knives. If he's doing that much legitimate business, he shouldn't have time to be violating the law, and the police know that. They'll leave him alone.

"Joining us offers him another advantage. Not only have you shown him a way to get rid of knives that is far easier than hawking them himself, but if a Gypsy troop can sell quantities of knives for him, the connection gives him an excuse to travel about the country and provides excellent cover for his hauling counterfeit coins to London."

"In that case—please excuse me," I said. "I have some unfinished business of my own to take care of."

I sought out Fiona and presented her with the ten pounds I had gotten for her basket. I also showed her the money I'd earned selling knives. She was astonished. She took the ten pounds to her father and recounted my adventures to him. As a result, he strolled over and had a brief conference with Lady Sara, who, when he left, turned to me with a frown on her face.

"What else have you been up too?" she demanded.

"Nothing much. Why?"

"Fiona's father has decided you might make a highly acceptable suitor for Fiona despite your being a *gorgia*."

"I sold a basket for her for ten pounds. Now I have something else to do if we want Ruckler to continue swallowing the bait."

I borrowed Fiona for a few min-

utes, led her over to Ruckler's van, and introduced her to him as my basket-weaving sweetheart. He regarded her with interest.

"She's a nice little piece of muslin, and obviously you're doing well as a Gypsy. If you like the life, who's to say you haven't made the right choice? Do you want to go on selling knives for me?"

I shrugged. "Why not? It's profitable."

"We should be able to work out something."

I recruited Rick and Charles to help me, and the several villages we stopped at the next day cleaned Ruckler out of butcher knives. By that time we had almost reached Oxford. We changed our tactics there and sold carving sets with results that astonished him.

"How do you do it?" he demanded.

I flattered him by taking the question seriously. "First, it's good merchandise at a very good price. Second, Gypsies know how to peddle."

"They certainly do," he agreed. "Look—I've got to get back to London to pick up more stock. When I return—I say, we've got a great thing going here, but this circus moves too slowly. Isn't there some way we could park the goats and all that and move faster?"

"That's for Madam Zarno to decide," I said. "We can put it up to her when you get back."

The Metropolitan Police already had officers discreetly following us. Others would pick up Ruckler along the way, and follow him all the way to his London address, and

callers to that address would be followed in the hope that they would lead the police to the place the counterfeit gold sovereigns were being stored.

In the meantime, the Gypsies set up camp near High Wycombe. If anyone asked, we were taking a well-earned vacation. Actually, we were working furiously so we would be ready for Ruckler's return. Lady Sara wanted to know just how much bait he was willing to swallow.

When Ruckler came back, he sought out the campground at once, learned that I had gone to town, and looked for me there. I had taken Fiona to a sweet shop for an ice cream. She had never had any. She was giggling with sheer delight. Ruckler regarded her oddly until I explained that she was experiencing ice cream for the first time.

"You don't say. Can we get this circus headed west tomorrow?"

"I doubt that," I said. "Madam Zarno has some banking business to take care of tonight. It's a full moon, you know."

He took at least a minute to think that over. "Banking business—tonight?"

I nodded.

"What sort of bank is it that does business at night?"

"The best kind," I said. "And don't forget the full moon. Do your banking business at midnight, in a full moon, and your assets are absolutely safe. You don't have to worry about money at all, or counterfeit or discounted notes, or bankruptcies, or any of the other claptrap bankers indulge in to keep their

clients mystified about where their money is. You deposit a shilling in this bank, you've always got a shilling."

He said slowly, "You mean that Gypsies do their banking at midnight—"

"In the light of a full moon," I interposed. "Don't forget the full moon—that's highly important if you want your money to be completely safe."

"... at midnight in the light of a full moon.... Now where could anyone do that kind of banking?"

"Safest bank imaginable," I said. "Believe me, no one—and I do mean *no one*—ever breaks into this bank or steals as much as a farthing from it."

"You'll have to show me," he said.

I immediately became coy about the whole business. "About that, I don't know. It isn't my bank—it's Madam Zarno's. She won't even take me along. One's banking business is a highly private operation, you know. Or should be."

"You said more than a mouthful there," Ruckler remarked with feeling. "But I say—couldn't she introduce me as a new customer?"

I studied him with great deliberation until he actually got uncomfortable about it. "Madam Zarno is rich," I said finally. "She needs a secure place for her money. Me, my few pounds are safe enough hidden in a clean pair of socks. Gypsies don't steal from each other; there are no thieves among us. Your money and property are completely safe while you're traveling with us. You don't need a bank any more than I do."

He dropped his voice. "I got plenty of money I need a secure place for—actually, secure places."

"But any bank can provide you with that. Madam Zarno's bank isn't just a secure place—it's a very special secure place. It's expensive, and when you put something into it, only you can get it out."

"What about my partners?" Ruckler asked.

"Better ask Madam Zarno. I never had cause to be making inquiries about it."

When we got back to the Gypsy encampment, Madam Zarno had returned. I raised the possibility of introducing Ruckler as a new customer for her bank, and she scrutinized him as deliberately as I had.

"Why do you need a special bank?" she asked him. "Your business may be doing well, but you can't be *that* rich."

"I'm plenty rich," he assured her. "If your bank is absolutely secure, that's what I want. I don't care if it's expensive."

"It doesn't work like most banks," Madam Zarno said. "With most banks, you deposit a sovereign; a week, or a month, or a year later, you want your sovereign back, and you ask for it, and the bank gives you a sovereign. Not *your* sovereign, understand, but *a* sovereign. With my bank, the sovereign I get back is always *my* sovereign. When you become a member, you have a vault of your own. No one puts anything in it except you. No one takes anything out except you. But this is a very special bank in other respects. It's like belonging to an exclusive gentlemen's club in Lon-

don—if you can imagine a club like the Athenaeum providing private safes for its members with a security beyond anything you can imagine. Believe me—no one or nothing gets anywhere near the secure area of this bank and lives to tell about it. The average man doesn't need that measure of security—just as the average man doesn't need a club like the Athenaeum. All of that is as expensive as you would expect. The annual dues depend on the size of vault you select. The average would be about a thousand pounds a year. Better forget it.”

“The contrary,” Ruckler said. “The more I hear, the more interesting it sounds. The only reservation I had is whether my partners would have access to my vault.”

“Of course, if it's a partnership vault. You would have to introduce them the first time they call.”

“And what about this doing banking only at midnight during a full moon? That could be inconvenient.”

“Midnight, yes. You will understand why after one visit. The full moon is a customer preference. I happen to prefer it that way. I don't want bad luck trailing after my financial dealings. If you don't care, that's your affair.”

The matter was quickly arranged. With Ruckler accompanying us, we would try to arrive at the bank not later than ten o'clock. Madam Zarno would take Ruckler and me as her guests. “It'll be easier if there are two of you,” she said and offered no further explanation. “Understand one thing: Whatever happens there, whatever you experience, is com-

pletely secret. You are not to divulge it to anyone, not even to your partners. If you become a customer, you can introduce them, and they will experience the bank themselves. The bank has a long arm, and one thing it will not tolerate is a blabby customer. The bank's affairs—and your affairs—are not to be mentioned away from the premises.”

“That's perfectly all right with me,” Ruckler said fervently.

But the matter wasn't completely settled until both Ruckler and I had donned our best “dress up” suits and been inspected. Madam Zarno instantly rejected Ruckler's cravat and sent him to borrow one of mine. I had only two; fortunately, the one I could spare passed inspection.

We set off in the one carriage the Gypsy troop could provide, an elderly, ramshackle vehicle driven with great skill by Charles Tupper. Rick Allward accompanied him. We drove for some distance; then we passed a gatehouse—as ramshackle as our carriage—and an elderly servant, whose shoddy uniform would have gone well with our carriage, stepped out to salute as we went by. The road—now it was a drive, scarcely wide enough for one vehicle—pointed upward.

At one point Madam Zarno indicated a distant hilltop. “There it is,” she said.

A few lights glimmered. Against the full moon, a ghostly, gothic structure loomed, all towers and misplaced sections of roof and crenellated battlements. Eventually we reached it. Rick sprang down smartly and opened the carriage

door. A portly servant hurried to assist him. At the door, we were welcomed ceremoniously by the most correctly dignified butler in all of Britain.

I had met him before. He was Sherwin Venner, once a celebrated author, and my previous impression of him—that he could have passed as the elderly prime minister of some Ruritanian state—was correct. He also made a superb butler, poised, thoughtful, deft in all of his movements, with the impression he created much aided by the fact that he looked the part. I wondered where he had got the dress coat—probably Lady Sara had hired one for him.

The drawing room was what one would have expected in an isolated, private bank. It looked exquisitely old and newly polished. Everything glittered, everything looked priceless. A waiter was at our elbows immediately with a tray of glasses of champagne. Before I could take my first sip, a gaunt figure detached itself from a group at the rear of the room and advanced on us like the Charge of the Light Brigade.

"Ah—Madam Zarno! How are you, Thurzie? It seems like years since I've seen you."

"It *has* been years," Madam Zarno said severely. "Unlike some people I could mention, I manage my affairs so as to avoid frequent visits to my bank."

"Now don't be so severe, Thurzie. We can't all be like you. Mind like a steel trap. However long it's been, you don't look a day older."

Madam Zarno introduced him to Ruckler and me—His Highness, the

Duke of Wollaston. He acknowledged the introductions with exaggerated politeness, pronouncing our names after Madam Zarno did. "Tarsh," he murmured, when Madam Zarno pronounced my Gypsy name. "Interesting name, that. Don't think I've heard it before."

For Marvin Ruckler, he took a step forward so as to scrutinize him better. "Ruckler, Ruckler—I do believe we are connected on my mother's side. Isn't that so?"

"I—couldn't say, Your Highness," Ruckler murmured.

"Interesting people on my mother's side," the duke said. "Lots of blah on my father's side. I do believe my mother had a Ruckler connection. I must look it up."

We drifted across the room, met the other guests. About half of them were women. I counted another duke, an earl, a countess, a marquis, a baroness, and two members of Parliament among them. It was quite the most distinguished gathering I'd ever attended.

Dinner was announced almost at once. It was what Lord Anstee, Lady Sara's close friend and the Marquis of Donover, would have called a feast and a quarter—more than we could eat and no quarter given. It was a procession of magnificent dishes, punctuated by vintage wines and highlighted by scintillating talk. All of those present, it seemed—except Ruckler and myself—attended all of the plays and concerts in London as well as the manipulations of high society.

At the end, there was no nonsense about the ladies retiring and the men remaining in place for

their brandy. Everyone remained in place for the brandy. The one difference between this dinner party and all the others I'd ever heard of was that the distinguished butler made an unobtrusive entrance from time to time and spoke quietly to one of the guests, who followed him out. That guest did not return; instead, after a time, the butler returned to summon another.

Finally it was Madam Zarno's turn. She motioned Ruckler and me to follow her; the butler escorted us to the back of the house and left us at the head of a long stairway where another servant took over. The butler, the onetime romantic author, gave me a discreet wink in parting.

We descended all the way to the dungeon, or so it seemed. At the bottom, we turned into a corridor and were instantly greeted by a thunderous roar. Ruckler recoiled to the opposite side of the corridor. Madam Zarno turned.

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a tiger before?"

Ruckler murmured something inaudible and followed after her. He might have explained that seeing a tiger is not quite the same thing as having the hot breath of one on your neck; it had been that close to the barred door when we passed it.

"That's Mickey," Madam Zarno explained. "He and a few of his friends—William, there, is another—patrol the corridors when there are no customers calling." William was a full-grown male rhinoceros.

"The problem with William is that he makes quite a racket when

he charges down a corridor. It's the same problem with Emily—she's an elephant. But there are no hiding places, and they don't miss a thing. There also is a leopard, an African buffalo—his horns are vicious—and a grizzly bear from America. They are very effective guardians. There has never been a robbery or even a minor theft at this bank."

We had reached an intersection of corridors and they formed a good-sized room with a high ceiling. A netting drooped above us, and in it—

"Good God!" Ruckler exclaimed.

"I forgot Celeste—she's a boa constrictor," Madam Zarno explained blithely. "There's some disagreement as to whether she is large enough to actually eat a thief if she caught one, but there can be no doubt that she would give him an extremely uncomfortable time until help came, and the thief would be unlikely to come back for a second try. Now—" There was a group of chairs where several corridors branched off—"if you two will wait here—as I explained, each customer's business is private. Only the customer has access to his vault or has any inkling of how to gain entrance to it because each vault operates differently. If Mr. Ruckler becomes a customer, all of that will be explained to him."

We sat and watched while she made her way to the far end of the corridor. We were too far away to see exactly what she did, but the vault's door opened, she added—or took away—something, the door closed with a ringing clang, and her

bank business had been completed. On the way out, we paused while Mr. Ruckler conducted some highly confidential business with a bank official. Then we left.

Our conscientious coachmen were waiting for us at the door. Ruckler had little to say on the return journey, but when we reached the encampment, he profusely thanked Madam Zarno for a truly unique experience. He failed to mention whether he had actually become a member of the bank. As Madam Zarno had said, a person's banking was his own private business.

We headed westward, selling knives along the way, and business was spectacularly good. So good, in fact, that if Ruckler had been in it for the money, he could have turned a fair profit. Nothing further was said about Madam Zarno's private bank until we approached Gloucester. Then he asked Madam Zarno for a private interview, and after a time she invited me to join them. She had already cautioned me that this might happen and even rehearsed me in what I would say.

"Mr. Ruckler is wondering whether we Gypsies would be willing to carry some of his stock back to High Wycombe," she said. "He is willing to pay well for it."

"Then they certainly would be willing," I said.

"His problem is—he doesn't want any meddling with the cases. He wants to know if the Gypsies can be trusted to transport his goods without opening them?"

I took a moment to deliberate. "Being Gypsies, and being naturally curious, I would say—no. Prob-

bly half of them would peek. Maybe three quarters. If they were asked to solemnly swear they wouldn't, then certainly three quarters would. That doesn't mean they would steal anything—almost certainly they wouldn't. It just means that they'd want to know what it was he was so fussy about."

She nodded. "Exactly. Is there any way around the problem? Certainly it is in our interest if we can put the Gypsies in the way of earning a tidy sum for each family. How can we protect Mr. Ruckler's property?"

"Does it have to be Mr. Ruckler's property?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What if it were your property—something forbidden, say, and you placed a spell on it and told them it would be dangerous and maybe even fatal to touch it until you had performed a counterspell?"

She turned to Ruckler. "That seems feasible. How does it look to you?"

"I don't care what you call it," he said. "I just don't want a lot of strangers pawing through my property."

"We will try that," she said. "Schwarz crystals, I think. They're at least as heavy as cutlery, and if the other Gypsies are told that's what the crates contain, they'll never go near them."

"What are Schwarz crystals?" Ruckler wanted to know.

"I'll get some and show them to you. I'll have to show them to everyone and do a very public spell—and, later, an equally public counterspell. Then no one will touch your crates."

Schwarz crystals looked to me like dirty black—or black-striped—stones, but a thing is what you call it, especially if it has magical implications. Madam Zarno performed a spell over the stack of crates Ruckler provided—an enormous stack—with a pile of crystals heaped up beside them to absorb the bad vibrations. Then the crates were loaded, three or four to a van or wagon, and the troop turned eastward.

We continued to sell knives, but now it was only a cover for what the entire troop was carrying. Business continued to be good; otherwise, the trek east was uneventful. We occupied our old camp near High Wycombe, and that night, without any concern for the moon, the entire troop, with all of the caravans, moved up the narrow drive to the old gothic manor house.

Sherwin Venner was the same consummate butler he had been before; Ruckler was greeted as a customer, as was Madam Zarno. The dinner was excellent. The company was as distinguished as it had been the first time. I counted two dukes, an earl, a foreign count from somewhere, and a miscellany of barons. When Ruckler's turn came to be conducted to his vault, he didn't invite any visitors to accompany him. At least, he didn't invite me. As Madam Zarno had said, a person's banking was his own business.

Madam Zarno accompanied him, however. She had an important function to perform.

I knew what would happen. He had engaged a room-sized vault. The Gypsy procession had been

waiting at a lower entrance; carts were available. First Madam Zarno performed her counterspell. Then the entire troop unloaded Ruckler's gold—Madam Zarno's Schwarz crystals, they thought—and carted them into Ruckler's vault. On their way out, Madam Zarno conducted purification ceremonies over each Gypsy.

Afterward, we returned to our encampment. Ruckler left at once for London. That was the last time we saw him. The next thing we heard, he, and all his associates, had been arrested—some of them in London, some in Gloucester and Bristol, and some in Scotland. The newspapers reported that the stolen gold had been recovered.

The trial that followed—which took place in France—was the official termination of the Case of the Fractured Puzzle.

The real ending occurred in Britain. Lady Sara and I went to call on Lord Sutliff, Marquis of Hengrave, in his splendid old gothic manor that stood perched on a hill near High Wycombe. He received us in his library. He was a frail old man, unable to walk unassisted, but his mind, Lady Sara assured me, was fully alert. He occupied a magnificent old bentwood rocking chair, and he was enfolded in quilts, with a book in his lap and several more at his elbow. He greeted us with a smile and apologized for not getting up to receive us.

Lady Sara introduced me, and then she thanked him for the use of his manor.

His eyes sparkled. "It was an event," he said. "The servants will

talk of it for years to come. They enjoyed it thoroughly. They were much impressed by the extra staff you engaged and also by those impersonating noblemen and women. Excellently trained, they thought them. They couldn't believe the servants had never waited on anyone except on the stage."

"With a thousand people studying their every move six evenings and two matinees a week, their performances have to be flawless in all the little things a regular servant might overlook," Lady Sara said.

"Your prediction about strangers making inquiries proved to be accurate, also. The villagers derived great amusement from telling them what a horrible place this is, intruders having to fly for their lives from ferocious wild animals, and so on. No local people dare to come near, they said."

"His Lordship makes a hobby of giving a home to unwanted wild animals," Lady Sara explained to me. "Animals who have become too old or sickly to earn their keeps in zoos or circuses find a comfortable retirement here. Those not likely to wander off or that can be restrained by fences are allowed to run loose, so any of Ruckler's friends who came to investigate his strange bank story were likely to meet a rhinoceros, or a hippo, or an elephant taking an afternoon stroll. They really didn't need the villagers' stories to convince them the estate had very capable guardians."

"The French police officer was extremely gracious," Lord Sutliff said. "Glad to have his money back, I take it."

"Now *that* is an understatement if I ever heard one," Lady Sara said. "But Colin is bursting with a question."

"Was all of that theatrical folderol really necessary?" I asked. "You had Ruckler pinpointed; you could follow him to his friends on either end of his route, and you could follow the friends to their hideouts, which you actually did. Why didn't the police just grab the money before it was moved and avoid that business of persuading him to bring it here himself?"

"It was necessary," Lady Sara said, "because we didn't know where they might have hidden it or how much. The French didn't want to arrest the thieves and recover only ten percent of the gold. By persuading the thieves to put the gold in one completely safe place—they thought—we recovered more than ninety per cent of it and a good part of the remainder was found where the gang members were arrested. It was a highly successful stunt. Also—" She smiled. "Sherwin Venner's magnificent performance as butler earned him a share in the reward, and since his son, David, provided the critical clue, the two of them might receive as much as five thousand pounds—some small recompense to Sherwin for the fickle public's failure to appreciate the books he wrote after *Rawnsley*."

"Ah! *Rawnsley*," Lord Sutliff murmured. "Now that was a novel. Sometimes I think all the romance has gone out of our lives—and our books as well. If you ever need a setting for another theatrical, keep me in mind." □

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

The security staff entered the briefing room. Most had cups of steaming coffee in hand. It was four in the morning.

"As if we didn't have enough trouble with this political convention," Chief Ray Beane declared, "now we have a reliable report that a disgruntled delegate plans to blow up the presidential candidate.

"My informant says that the suspected husband and his wife will travel here by train. Six couples are due by train. They will arrive every hour this morning starting at seven. One comes from El Paso. One man is named Arthur and one wife is named Laura.

"I want you to go to the station and head off this threat—if possible."

"Understood, chief," said Tom Gunn. "We'll report back here at thirteen-hundred hours, hopefully with the would-be assassin arrested."

The security team discovered that:

(1) The six husbands are Donald (who didn't arrive at nine), Mr. North, Kathy's husband, the man from Denver, the man from Abilene (who isn't married to Helen), and the one who arrived at ten o'clock.

(2) The six wives are Helen, Mrs. Queen (who isn't Greta), Mrs. Roller (who is either from Chicago or from Fargo), Carl's wife, Frank's wife (who is neither the woman from Fargo nor the one who arrived at noon), and the woman who came first.

(3) Elbert arrived after nine and before noon.

(4) Julia (who is not Mrs. Queen) is from neither Chicago nor Fargo. Mrs. Parker (who isn't Kathy) is neither from Abilene nor Denver.

(5) Three wives arrived after nine o'clock: Mrs. O'Dell, the woman from Buffalo, and Ida (who arrived some time before Mrs. Mason.)

(6) Brad is not Mr. North. Donald is not Mr. Parker.

The team reassembled back at headquarters. "Success!" Tom Gunn reported. "Got the evidence with no trouble!"

"How?" asked Chief Beane.

"Sniffer dog, sir. One smelled the explosives being carried in the luggage of the last couple to arrive at the station.

Who was the delegate planning to assassinate the candidate?

See page 127 for the solution to the July/August puzzle.

FICTION

KELSO'S GHOST

Malcolm
McClintick

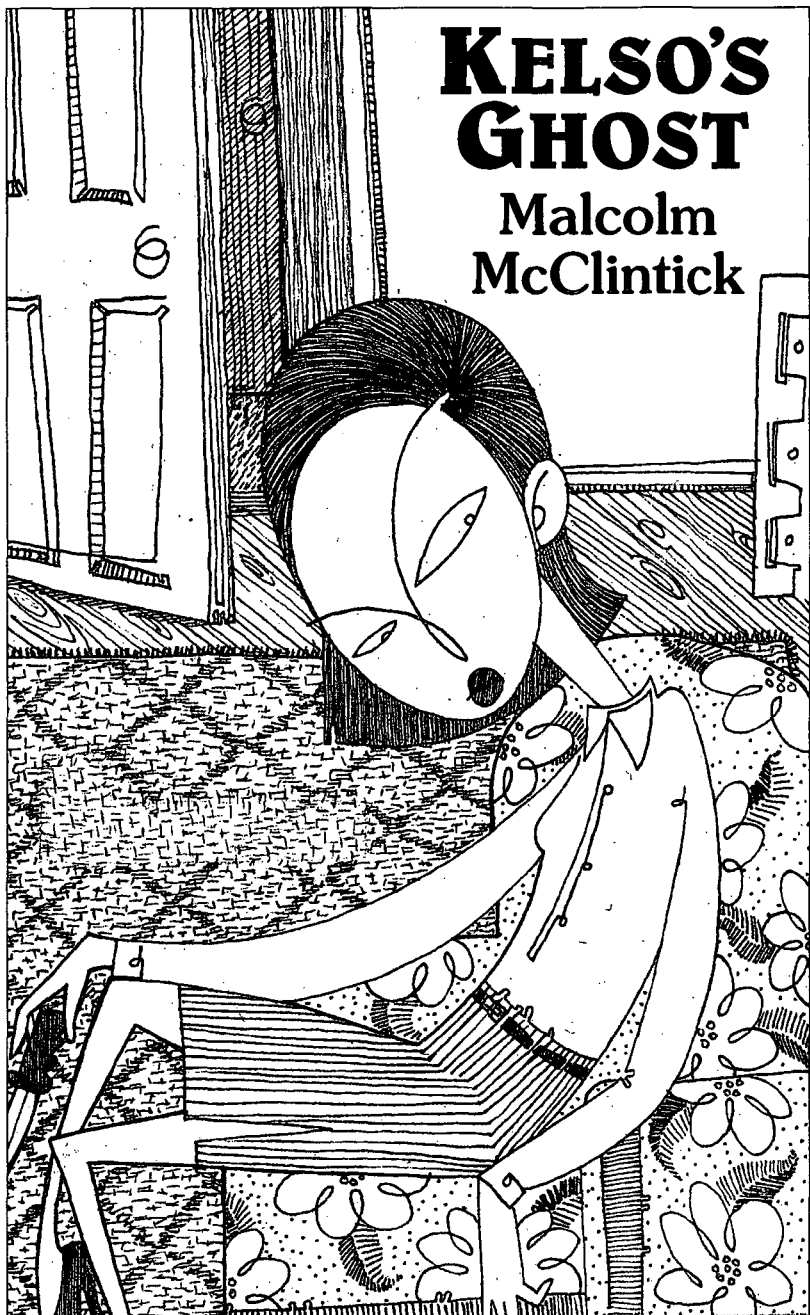


Illustration by Kelly Denato

91 LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/02

“**Y**ou don’t believe in ghosts, do you?” Leill asked. Sergeant George Kelso blinked at his lieutenant. What could the man be getting at? Had he finally succumbed to the pressures of the police department’s Detective Section? Was he nuts? “Ghosts?” Kelso replied. “Of course not.”

They sat in Leill’s office on a cold overcast morning in late March, Leill behind his desk, Kelso on the hard wooden visitor’s chair. Leill’s steely gray eyes held no trace of humor or irony. He let out a long breath.

“I know what it sounds like, Kelso. But it’s not my fault. I don’t suppose you bothered to keep up with the local news while you were cavorting around a nice sunny beach with that Overstreet girl?”

“No, sir. I avoid all news while I’m on vacation, it defeats the purpose. And I wasn’t exactly cavorting with her—we do happen to be engaged.”

“And it’s about time, too.” Leill sighed again. “Okay, Kelso, here it is, in a nutshell. Ever heard of Northridge House?”

“Uh . . . not that I recall.”

“Well, it’s one of those old Victorian houses down in the historical section. Woman named Emily Northridge owns it. Been in her family for years. Eleven years ago, both her parents died in a boating accident and she inherited it. Now she makes a living by telling everybody it’s haunted and charging admission.”

“Haunted?”

“Did I stutter, Kelso? Haunted.”

Kelso suppressed a chuckle. “Haunted by what?”

“By her grandmother’s ghost. The old lady was in one of those homes. When the Northridge woman got the house, she moved the old lady in there, started taking care of her. A year later, somebody stabbed her to death in her bed.”

“Who stabbed her?”

“Case was never solved. Still on the books, in the cold-case files.”

Kelso pulled an old pipe from a pocket of his battered corduroy jacket. He missed smoking it, but he’d promised Susan to stop. . . . He thought back ten years. “I don’t remember that, sir.”

“I think you were on burglary detail at the time. At any rate—”

Leill’s phone buzzed. He snatched it up angrily, growled, “Not now, damn it,” and slammed it down. “As I was saying, Kelso, the Northridge woman’s thirty-five. Former legal secretary. All she inherited was the house and a stack of overdue bills, no money. But she does all right for herself with this ghost racket. Lots of superstitious people willing to part with their cash to hear a ghost story. According to her, it appears at various times—well, I won’t bore you with the details. Anyway, while you were in Miami—”

“St. Petersburg, sir.”

“Whatever. While you were away, a guy named Einer Ahlberg blew into town—”

"Dr. Einer Ahlberg? The debunker?"

Lieutenant Leill scowled impatiently. "Yes, yes, the debunker. Can I finish the story?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ahlberg blew in, somehow got wind of this Northridge House, and immediately made the rounds of the local TV news shows telling everybody how there are no such things as ghosts or haunted houses. Said anybody who made money off such things was a fraud and a crook. It hit the fan. Emily Northridge filed a million-dollar defamation suit against Ahlberg. He challenged her to a debate. They went on live TV, one of those local morning news shows, and he called her a sham. She dared him to spend three nights in the house alone. He said he'd spend *four* nights. She said if he did, and nothing happened, she'd drop the lawsuit. Ahlberg said if he saw a ghost, he'd pay her a million bucks *without* the lawsuit. Ahlberg moved in five nights ago with a camcorder. He never came out. The fourth morning, when nothing happened, Emily Northridge went inside with her lawyer and Ahlberg's lawyer. They found him dead in an upstairs bedroom with a knife in his chest."

Leill paused, a big gray man in a big gray suit. His steely gaze could be intimidating. Kelso himself had been intimidated, at first; but his years on the force had softened the blow. Somewhat.

"Doesn't sound like a ghost to me," Kelso said. "What kind of knife was it?"

One of Leill's gray eyebrows shot up. "Wooden-handled Chicago Cutlery kitchen knife with a six and three-quarter inch blade. Why?"

"Just curious. Is the house furnished?"

"It's partially furnished. It's preserved. Historical. All that. Can I finish?"

"Yes, sir."

"So this debunker guy, this Einer Ahlberg—"

"He's Swedish, isn't he?"

"Naturalized American citizen. Will you shut up while I finish?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, Ahlberg turns up dead in the same house the old grandmother was murdered in, stabbed in the chest just like the grandmother, and the Northridge woman's already telling the newspapers and TV people that the ghost did it." Leill paused. Then, "You see why the obvious suspect is Emily Northridge, don't you, Kelso?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Because if Dr. Ahlberg's right and the ghost is a hoax, then maybe Emily Northridge stands to lose a lot of money. No more paying customers."

"Exactly. My theory is, she knew Ahlberg was about to come out of that house and tell the world he'd just spent four days and nights in there and never saw a damn thing, and probably had a bunch of videotape to give

the news media, hours of tape of empty rooms and no ghosts. And she wasn't about to let him do it. He'd already called her a fraud. Now she can parade his murder around as proof that the ghost exists. She's calling it the ghost's revenge."

Kelso took out his pipe again. Fingering it, sticking his thumb in the bowl as if tamping tobacco into it.

"Even if Dr. Ahlberg's dead, he's already called her a fraud," Kelso pointed out. "Won't that stick in people's minds?"

"You don't understand the superstitious public, Kelso. The kind of people who believe ghost stories like that in the first place will believe the rest of it. She might even get more customers than before. 'See where my dead grandmother's ghost appeared? See the bloodstains? That's where my grandmother's ghost stabbed Dr. Ahlberg to death.' That kind of thing."

"Well, she wasn't even in the house, was she? I thought you said Dr. Ahlberg stayed there alone."

"That was the deal. But a house has windows and doors. Somebody can enter a house. Somebody obviously entered this one." Leill paused, then added, "That Northridge woman lives right next door."

Kelso nodded. "I see. I don't suppose anybody spotted her entering or leaving the house?"

"You suppose right. So, Kelso, you go over there and take charge of the investigation. The crime-scene people have finished, it's all yours. I'll get you a copy of the lab report, the fingerprint report, and the coroner's report, but they won't help you any. No fingerprints except Ahlberg's and that woman's, and none at all on the knife. Ahlberg was stabbed once, straight through the heart, probably died within seconds." Leill sighed. "That Northridge woman's mining this thing for all the publicity she can. I want an arrest before it turns into a circus over there. All right, Kelso?"

"Yes, sir." Kelso shoved his unlit pipe into another pocket of his corduroy coat, got up, stepped away. Stopped.

"Lieutenant?"

"What is it, Kelso?"

"You said Dr. Ahlberg took a camcorder with him. What was on the tapes he made?"

"There weren't any tapes."

"Sir?"

"All we found was his camcorder. Empty. No tape in the camcorder, no tapes in his bags. Obviously, somebody grabbed 'em. Whoever stabbed him, probably."

"I see." He reached for the door.

"Kelso?"

"Sir?"

"You really don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Good. And, Kelso . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"I know you're engaged and all that. But I've seen how you look at attractive women once in a while. Keep your guard up with this Northridge woman. Don't look at me like that. She's goodlooking, and she's got a very strong personality. I need an investigator over there who won't be influenced by her."

"I won't be," Kelso said, and left the office.

On the way over to Northridge House in his vintage yellow VW Beetle, George Kelso thought suddenly of a time when he'd very much believed in ghosts. Stopping at a red light, he pictured himself lying in his bed, a nine-year-old kid, awakened in the dead of night by a thunderstorm.

His room was long and narrow. Near the foot of his bed, lightning flashed in a tall window, illuminating the opposite wall with an eerie flicker. He'd been having a scary dream, something to do with Halloween, which was only a couple of days away. Something hovered in the darkness, waiting for him . . .

Nine-year-old George lay there and watched the flickering glow dance its way across the patterned wallpaper. He thought something moved in the deep shadows at the far end of his room, and chills gripped his body. Pulling the covers up to his chin, he scrunched down in his bed so far that his toes hung over the end of the mattress—and something grabbed one of his toes.

George yelled, jerked his feet up, bent his knees, doubled himself up into a fetal position, and pulled the covers completely over his head. A ghost had gotten into his bedroom and danced on his wall, and walked to his bed, and grabbed his toe.

He knew it was still there, waiting at the foot of his bed, watching him in the darkness between lightning flashes, ready to grab him again if he so much as moved a muscle . . .

The traffic light turned green. Kelso accelerated through the intersection and forced the image from his mind. He shuddered. Funny how a childhood memory could cling so tenaciously and still, after all these years of adulthood, produce a new round of chills up and down your back. Or maybe it was simply the VW's lack of very much heat on a cold March morning . . .

Kelso pulled into the driveway of Northridge House, got out, and slammed the Beetle's door hard, as if to dispel, once and for all, any silliness about ghosts. A marked city police cruiser was parked in the driveway ahead of him, behind an imposing SUV. The Victorian home was old but looked well cared for, recently painted, two stories in bluish-gray with dark red trim.

He went up onto a small porch and rang the bell. A young uniformed cop named Sturgiss opened the door and frowned.

"House is closed, buddy. You'll have to come back some other time."

Kelso waved his police ID. "Sergeant Kelso. Detective Section."

"Oh. Sorry, Sergeant. I didn't recognize you." Looking embarrassed, Sturgiss moved back and held the door wide. "Uh, you're a little late, aren't you, Sarge?"

"I've been on vacation." Kelso stepped inside, into a long, narrow hallway. "What're you doing, keeping out the spectators?"

"That, and the news media."

"Ms. Northridge around?"

"She's in there somewhere. Uh, you planning on talking to her?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Nothing . . . just . . . uh, nothing, Sarge."

At that moment a door at the far end of the hall opened and a woman appeared. As she strode towards them, Kelso gave her a brief once-over: tall, shapely, looked younger than her age of thirty-five, short dark hair, very attractive features, with a stubborn chin and fiercely assertive dark eyes. She walked erect, shoulders back, like someone in charge, someone not used to being challenged. She wore an expensive silk blouse, knee-length skirt, and high-heeled pumps.

She halted, hands on hips, and frowned at Kelso.

"Officer? Who is this man? Didn't I ask you not to let anyone in?"

Sturgiss actually looked intimidated. "Uh, this is Sergeant Kelso, ma'am. He's one of the detectives."

"George Kelso." Kelso offered his hand. "You're Ms. Northridge?"

The woman regarded his hand for a moment as if deciding whether to accept it or not, then took it in a quick, firm grip and let go abruptly.

"I'm Emily Northridge. So you're a detective? Well, I hope you get this stupid case solved so I can get back to my normal routine. This is an extreme inconvenience."

"Murder sometimes is," Kelso said mildly.

She arched a dark eyebrow. "Are you making fun of me, Sergeant?"

"Not at all. I'd like to ask you a few questions. And I'd like to see the bedroom they found Dr. Ahlberg in." He'd decided there was only one approach to use with this young woman—a completely direct and straightforward approach. She wouldn't fall for anything else. Her dark eyes burned with intelligence.

"You can ask your questions while I show you the room. I've already answered a hundred questions, but I suppose you don't care about that. Why don't they put one person in charge instead of playing musical detectives?"

"I've been on vacation," Kelso said vaguely.

"Well, come on, then. It's up these stairs."

She headed away with long, purposeful strides, high heels loud on the

hardwood floor. Kelso glanced back. The uniformed cop was grinning at him.

"This is the way I take people on the tour," Emily Northridge was saying, leading the way up the steep staircase. "I start downstairs, give them a brief talk, and bring them up here."

The wooden risers creaked under Kelso's battered loafers. At the top of the stairs he stood next to the woman in a long, narrow hallway, dimly lighted, with closed doors along either wall. The uncarpeted wooden floor gleamed dully. Kelso smelled wax.

"This is where my dead grandmother's ghost always appears, Lieutenant."

"Sergeant."

"What? Oh. Yes. Sergeant. I can't keep all those stupid ranks straight. No offense. Anyway, Lydia always appears—"

"Lydia?"

"My dead grandmother. She always appears in this hall, walks straight to the end, and goes into that last bedroom on the right. It's where she was murdered."

"Who murdered her?" He just wanted to get her reaction.

"Your police department never found out. This way, Sergeant."

She led him to the end of the hall, opened a door on the right, and motioned for him to go in.

Kelso entered a large, square room, and felt a little chill. Nothing he could define or explain, just a brief tingling from the base of his spine up to the top of his head. He glanced around. The room was old-fashioned and high-ceilinged, and uncomfortably reminiscent of the one he'd had as a small boy . . .

A double bed stood high off the floor, enough space under it for a suitcase or a trunk. (Or a dead body, or a ghost . . .) Floor-length drapes, faded almost white with time, covered a couple of high, narrow windows on the far wall. The pale wallpaper was discolored. An ancient chest of drawers stood next to an antique dresser. Something weird about the dresser—no mirror.

"They found my grandmother in her bed," Emily Northridge said. "This bed. She was in her nightgown. A large knife stuck in her chest. The coroner said the blade went straight through her heart. She must've died instantly. No fingerprints on the knife."

Kelso wandered close to the bed and examined it. A white cotton bedspread lay over it, pulled all the way up to two pillows in pale blue pillowcases.

"Interesting bed."

She smiled. "This is also the bed where they found Dr. Ahlberg." She paused. Her smile might have been ironic, or it might have been self-satisfied—Kelso wasn't sure. Then she added, "Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say? He died in the same bed my grandmother died in,

and in the same way. A knife in his heart. Do you believe in ghosts, Sergeant Kelso?"

Kelso frowned. She was beginning to get on his nerves. "Of course not."

"Well, you should. This house is haunted by the ghost of my dead grandmother Lydia. She's appeared an average of three nights a week ever since her murder. That's why I agreed to let that awful debunker person stay here for four nights. That way, he'd probably see her at least once." She paused, raised an eyebrow, tilted her head slightly, and added, "And evidently he did."

"Ghosts don't stab people with knives," Kelso said.

She smiled. "How do you know what ghosts do, Sergeant?"

Why was he arguing with this woman? Kelso gritted his teeth and walked around the bedroom. The crime-scene people would have picked up everything, then vacuumed. Kelso didn't expect to find anything. But it was habit. He'd been on a homicide case once where a man had been shot in his den. The investigators had gone over the den with a fine-tooth comb. But they'd ignored the pair of early western Colt .44 revolvers inside a display case on the pine-paneled wall, and one of them had turned out to be the murder weapon. Kelso peered here and there. But in this case, nothing obvious stood out.

He wandered to a small door hanging ajar in a far corner, pulled it open, and glanced inside. He saw a tiny half-bath, just enough room for a sink and toilet. Everything looked spotless.

Then he noticed something odd.

There were no mirrors in the bathroom. No shaving mirror on the medicine cabinet door, no mirror behind the sink, no mirrors anywhere at all.

Emily Northridge was peering in at Kelso, a slight frown on her haughtily attractive features. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Kelso replied absently. "Just . . ." He stepped past her, back into the bedroom. "You say Dr. Ahlberg stayed in this room? This is where they found him?"

"Of course."

"Why aren't there any mirrors in the bathroom? And no mirror on that dresser?"

Emily Northridge regarded him for a moment before answering. "My grandmother was very superstitious. She hated mirrors. She thought they sucked life from her and made her old. She wouldn't have one in the house."

"The whole house? There's not a mirror in the entire house?"

"Not one."

"I wonder how Dr. Ahlberg shaved," Kelso said, more to himself than to her. Then, "I understand you found his body—right?"

She nodded. "When he didn't come out, we went in. I live in that little brick bungalow next door. They came and got me, and we went in—myself, my attorney, and Dr. Ahlberg's attorney."

"And the three of you entered this room together?"

"I was the first one in. They followed behind me."

Kelso wandered around the bedroom once more. He had an annoying feeling that he'd had on several other cases—a feeling that something obvious dangled just in front of his nose, something he'd seen or heard but somehow overlooked or misinterpreted.

"Satisfied?" Emily Northridge looked smug.

"For now. Just, uh . . . you said you came in here and found Dr. Ahlberg lying on that bed with a knife in his chest?"

"That's what I said."

What was he overlooking? What was under his nose?

"Okay. I'd like to see the rest of the house, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all." Emily Northridge flashed a warm smile. She really had the prettiest eyes. "And after the tour, I'd like to show you something."

"Really?"

"Yes. This way, Sergeant."

She led the way from the bedroom and gave Kelso the rest of the grand tour.

There was nothing else to see. They wound up in the living room, where she made Kelso sit in an armchair while she popped a tape into a VCR, then sat on the sofa, aimed the remote, and turned on the TV. She seemed to make a show of crossing her legs in a way that made her skirt ride up high and smirked at Kelso when she caught him looking.

Embarrassed, Kelso frowned at the TV set.

"I have a camcorder," she said. "I keep it around, especially if I'm over here in the evening, so I can get pictures of my grandmother when she happens to appear."

"Pictures?"

"I shot this just a few nights ago. Here, look at this, Sergeant . . ."

Kelso looked. The screen flickered a few times, then he saw a dimly-lighted hallway and recognized it as the one upstairs. The camera was at one end of the hall. At the far end, a ghostly image appeared. He stared.

An old lady slowly moved down the hall towards the camera. She seemed to float up and down as she moved, as if hovering off the floor. White hair framed a face so emaciated it was scarcely more than a skull. Tiny eyes peered from dark sockets. The cheeks were sunken. Thin lips stretched back from the teeth in a grimace. A long flowing gown of some gauzy material billowed around the thing's body as it drifted closer, and it raised and lowered its frail arms like some ancient bird flapping its wings.

Very close to the camera, it turned and went through a door, and vanished into darkness.

Emily Northridge clicked off the set and smiled at Kelso.

"Well?"

Kelso frowned. "And that was supposed to be . . . ?"

"My dead grandmother. Lydia. Or, rather, her ghost. In the upstairs hallway of this house. Several nights ago."

"I see."

"You don't believe it, do you, Sergeant?"

"I believe you, or someone, made a tape of somebody dressed up like an old lady."

She stood up. Her smile vanished. "If you're through with me, you can leave. I'm busy."

Kelso stood up, too. Shrugged. "Thanks for your time, Ms. Northridge."

"And I wish you'd stop calling me 'Miz.' I don't go for all that phony feminist junk."

"Maybe I should just call you Emily." -

She glared at him. "Maybe you should just call me Miss Northridge."

Kelso hesitated, then turned with a shrug and left the house. Outside the front door, the uniformed cop grinned.

"How'd it go in there, Sarge?"

"Shut up," Kelso said.

"That's what I thought."

An hour later, George Kelso sat once again on the hard wooden chair in Leill's office. Raindrops streamed down the windowpanes. Kelso briefed the lieutenant on his visit to Northridge House and told him about the videotape.

"You didn't arrest her?" Leill asked, scowling.

"For showing me a tape?"

"Just wishful thinking. So, you came up empty?"

"For now. Sir, did you know there aren't any mirrors in that house?"

"No. Why? The Northridge woman a vampire?"

Leill so rarely made any kind of joke at all that Kelso, at first, didn't realize he was making one now.

"A vampire?"

Leill never smiled. Sometimes he smirked. He smirked now and nodded. "Isn't there something about vampires and mirrors?"

"I don't know, sir. But Emily Northridge said her grandmother wouldn't have mirrors in the house, and there aren't any now. Ten years after her murder." He paused, blinked at the lieutenant. "Vampires?"

"Never mind. It was a joke." The smirk went away. "So, you think she killed Ahlberg?"

"I'm not sure yet. You said the house was searched. I don't suppose any videotapes were found? I mean, tapes that would fit Dr. Ahlberg's camcorder?"

"I know what you're thinking, Kelso. The answer is no. We checked. Ahlberg always used Sony tapes. A Sony camcorder and Sony tapes. His

lawyer and his secretary confirmed it. Nothing but Sony. And there wasn't a Sony tape in that house. And his camcorder was empty."

"What about next door, in Emily Northridge's bungalow?"

"Same answer. We got a warrant. Searched. No Sony tapes."

Leill leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and sat motionless for several moments. Kelso put his hand in his jacket pocket and idly fingered his pipe. After a moment Leill opened his eyes and sat up straight.

"All right, Kelso, that's all. You can go. Keep me informed."

"Sir? I have a theory."

"Theory? What theory?"

"At first I figured, what if Emily Northridge killed Dr. Ahlberg because he was debunking her ghost? You know, ruining her little haunted-house business. But I changed my mind. It's too obvious."

"Too obvious?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, I think that's what she'd like us to believe. But my guess is, if she killed him, there's a different reason."

"Such as?"

"Such as something hidden in that house that she doesn't want anyone to find. And either Dr. Ahlberg found it, or she was afraid he'd find it, and that's why she killed him. If she did."

Leill nodded thoughtfully. "That's an interesting possibility, Kelso. Something in that house . . . any idea what it could be?"

"No, sir. Except, well, I just keep thinking about those mirrors."

"Mirrors!"

"Yes, sir. See—"

"Forget about mirrors, Kelso." Leill stood up. "All right. I've made a decision. I've already got Meyer and Broom and Karl Smith going around questioning people, all the neighbors and those two lawyers." He pointed a thick finger at Kelso. "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to tell that Northridge woman that you're onto something. You think there's evidence in that house. And I've ordered you to stay there for a couple of days. And nights."

Kelso stood up, too, and blinked several times in disbelief. "Excuse me, sir? You want me to what?"

"You heard me. Don't act so surprised. We both think that woman's hiding something. This is the best way to find out what it is. Force her hand. Scare her into doing something stupid. If she murdered Ahlberg, and she thinks you've got something, she might try to, uh . . ."

"You're setting me up, is that it? Making me the bait?"

"That's your job, Kelso. And that's an order. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." He pictured Emily Northridge's reaction. "What if she refuses?"

"I'll get a court order. Tell her that. It's a crime scene. I can order her out, if I want. In fact, I will. Make her leave the whole house to you, just like with Ahlberg."

"And see who comes calling?"

Leill smirked again. "Exactly. See who comes calling."

The evening before he moved into Northridge House, Kelso ate dinner with Susan Overstreet at her aunt's house. Aunt Eleanor made chicken and dumplings, mashed potatoes, lima beans, and hot buttered biscuits, and for dessert, one of George's favorites, peach cobbler. Susan and her aunt, both slim, picked at their food and watched George stuff himself. As he dug into a second helping of cobbler, he glanced at them.

"I feel like a condemned man eating his last meal."

"Oh, enjoy yourself, George, dear," Aunt Eleanor said. "My stomach's so tiny; after all, I'm seventy-two, you know, I can't eat much. It does me good to see a young man enjoy my cooking. My Herbert, bless his soul, could put away twice this much."

Kelso smiled politely, hoping the old lady wouldn't go off on one of her tangents about her dead husband.

"George only stuffs himself to be polite." Susan Overstreet, a brown-eyed blonde, arched a pale eyebrow at Kelso. "Now he'll have a stomachache. But he won't admit it."

"Oh, dear, I didn't want to give you a tummy ache. Would you like a little more coffee to wash it down with? Herbert always said coffee settled his stomach."

"I'm fine." Kelso pushed himself back from the table.

"When are you and George getting married, Susan, dear?"

Susan smiled. "Ask George. He doesn't want to rush into anything."

Aunt Eleanor regarded him through her round glasses. "You're almost forty years old, George. Isn't it about time you rushed into something?" She giggled.

Kelso winced.

"Aunt Eleanor!" Susan said.

"All right, all right, it's none of my business. You know, George, speaking of my Herbert—he still talks to me of an evening . . ."

Kelso nodded politely. "Really?" He thought, Here we go again . . .

"Susan knows it's true—don't you, Susan, dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Eleanor." Susan arched another eyebrow.

"George, Susan tells me you're getting ready to stay all by yourself in that haunted house, that Northridge House."

"It's not haunted," Kelso said stubbornly.

"Oh, it probably is, dear. My own house is haunted. Did you know Herbert appears to me some evenings, even now?"

"Maybe I'll have that coffee after all," Kelso tried, but it was too late—the old lady was off and running.

"I'll sit in my rocker by the fireplace," she said, "and suddenly I'll hear Herbert's voice. And when I look, there he is, my poor dead Herbert, right there in the flames. And he speaks to me and tells me things."

With only faint sarcasm in her voice, Susan Overstreet asked, "What things, Aunt Eleanor?"

"Things," the old lady said. She looked at George with her pale, watery eyes and blinked rapidly behind her little round spectacles. "But you mark my words, George. Ghosts exist. And they appear to the living. I wouldn't stay in that Northridge place, if I were you."

"George is a detective," Susan said, somewhat sharply. "He's not afraid. And he's got a gun."

"Oh, guns don't help. Not against ghosts."

Kelso moved into Northridge House at nine o'clock that night. He took a small bag that contained clothes and toilet articles and the following items: penlight with extra batteries, 35mm camera, cell phone, extra ammunition for the .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol he carried in the holster at his hip, and a small square mirror for shaving.

"This is the living room," Emily Northridge told him, stating the obvious with a sweep of her arm. "You're welcome to read any of the books on that shelf, just don't lose them or damage them. You can use the TV and VCR—I have tapes in that cabinet, movies and TV shows, a few nature shows. You won't tape over anything, will you? There are a few blank tapes, if you want to tape something." She rested her hands on her hips and regarded him doubtfully. "You won't try to steal the tapes of my grandmother's ghost?"

"No, ma'am. You can take them with you, if you want."

"I'll trust you."

"That's nice of you."

She gave him a sharp look, then said, "You know where the kitchen is. There's enough food in the fridge and the cabinets to last you three or four days. You won't be staying longer than that, will you?"

"I'm not planning on it."

"I'll be surprised if you make it past day three."

Kelso raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"My dead grandmother's ghost," Emily Northridge told him. "Who do you think murdered that debunker person? It certainly wasn't me. And who else could it have been?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," Kelso said.

"Neither did Einer Ahlberg."

They went back down the hall. At the front door she paused to give him another long look. He thought she was about to say something else, then she shrugged, turned, and walked out of the house without another word.

Kelso locked the door after her and went all around the house, upstairs and down, locking every door and window. Satisfied, he wandered back to the living room.

Upstairs, a door banged shut.

He froze. Listened. Didn't hear anything else. He was alone in an empty house. There couldn't be a door banging shut. Better check it out . . .

Kelso climbed the narrow staircase to the second floor, treading as softly as possible. The lights were on in the upstairs hall. They winked out just as he reached the top of the stairs, plunging him into total darkness. He stood stock still. Power outage? Old bulbs? Circuit breaker? Or somebody . . .

He forced himself to think like a police detective. If somebody was in the house, there were two basic possibilities. Either it was Emily Northridge, and she'd sneaked back in through a back door or a window, or it was someone who'd been in the house before Kelso arrived. Ghosts didn't slam doors and turn out lights.

Turning, Kelso went back downstairs. All the first-floor lights were still on, so it wasn't a power outage. Maybe a circuit breaker, or in a house this old, a fuse.

He opened his suitcase, grabbed his penlight, and toured the downstairs, methodically checking every window and door, making sure they were all still locked. He looked in every closet and behind every chair and sofa and under every table. Nobody was hiding down here. And it was locked up tight. If a human agency had slammed a door and turned out the hall lights, he or she was confined to the upstairs.

He said to hell with bravery and opted instead for caution, pulled his .45 from its holster, racked the slide, and started back up the stairs again.

As he reached the top of the stairs the hall lights came back on, making him squint in the sudden glare, and at the far end of the hall a door swung slowly open, creaking noisily on its hinges in the silence, like a sound effect in a horror movie.

Two thoughts flashed through Kelso's mind.

One—somebody must have hidden in the house.

Two—Emily Northridge's dead grandmother . . .

He thought about the ghostly image on the tape.

With an effort, he dismissed the dead grandmother and started down the hall, eyes on the open door at the far end, his crepe-soled loafers making almost no sound on the hardwood boards. He took his time, staying close to the wall on the same side as the open door, gun ready.

Kelso reached the door. Beyond the opening the room was dark, illuminated only faintly by light from the hall. Anybody could be in there, hunkered down with a gun, waiting.

He remembered an old trick with a flashlight and decided to try it. Why not? Nothing to lose.

He switched on the penlight, pressed himself flat against the wall, then slowly extended the penlight into the open doorway. Cringing a little, he waited, expecting any second to hear loud bangs and feel the burning pain of bullets crashing into his arm.

Nothing happened.

Kelso eased his body into the opening and looked into the room. The penlight's narrow beam swept over a large bed, dresser, window . . .

He stared. The window was raised. Long filmy curtains blew in the wind. That window had been closed. Hadn't it?

Kelso flipped the wall switch. The overhead light cast welcome brightness throughout the room. He muttered, "What's going on here?" Went over to the window, closed and locked it. Scratched his head. Somebody in the house? He'd seen Emily Northridge leave, he'd closed and locked the door behind her. She could've sneaked back in, though. Obviously, she had a key. Front door, back door, downstairs windows—all of them provided a means of entry for her. But why? To annoy him? Scare him away? Complicate his investigation?

Or was it somebody else?

Mirrors . . .

Kelso explored the rest of the upstairs without finding a thing. No more doors mysteriously opening and closing all by themselves, no locked windows wide open, no lights going off for no good reason.

He gave up and went downstairs again. He'd have a sandwich and a glass of milk, read a little, maybe watch some TV, and go to bed. In the morning, by light of day, he'd search the entire house inch by inch. If anything was hidden here, he'd find it.

A storm moved into the area about eleven o'clock. Kelso had always liked rain. He turned off the TV and listened to the rain beat against the windows and roof as thunder rumbled intermittently. From Emily Northridge's collection of books he selected a battered hardback copy of Edgar Allan Poe's stories. A memory flashed into his thoughts. As a young boy spending the night in a small lakeside cabin with his family, he'd found a collection of Poe's stories and decided to read it because a thunderstorm raged outside and he'd thought it would be "atmospheric." He remembered his mom trying to persuade him to read something else instead. "That Edgar Allan Poe stuff'll give you nightmares, George." He'd read it anyway, and the stories hadn't given him nightmares. Well, only a few . . .

Suddenly he remembered the ghost that had grabbed his toe, and shuddered. Lightning crashed nearby.

The lights in Emily Northridge's Victorian house flickered twice and went out. After a second they came back on again.

"Should've brought candles," Kelso muttered, and climbed the stairs.

He read part of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," decided maybe he shouldn't have, closed the book, and decided to call it a night. The storm was going full force. He turned off the overhead light, leaving only the bedside lamp on, brushed his teeth, stripped down to T-shirt and boxer shorts, and climbed under the covers. The double bed must've been given a new mattress recently; it felt comfortably firm.

He slipped his .45 under his pillow with the safety on, then reached over and turned off the lamp.

Lightning flashed in the two tall windows, flickering against the pale walls. After a while the flashes came less frequently, the thunder sounded farther away.

Between faint booms of thunder, Kelso thought he heard a door slam shut somewhere down the hall. Then, footsteps slowly and unmistakably approached his bedroom door.

It had to be Emily Northridge. And if she'd murdered Dr. Ahlberg, she was probably on her way to murder Kelso. For a moment he lay there, not exactly admiring the woman, but impressed by her daring and stubbornness—a woman willing to risk everything by sneaking into a house to kill the very detective who was investigating her, a police detective she must have known would be armed and waiting for her. He almost smiled. Talk about gall . . .

The footsteps stopped outside his door. Thunder rumbled once, far off in the distance. The rain was a steady hiss. Kelso's eyes had adapted to the dimness. He heard a click, and saw the door swing slowly open, forming a black rectangle against the gray of the wall.

Raising up on one elbow, Kelso reached under his pillow and grabbed the .45, thumbing off the safety. His eyes strained to see who had entered the room.

A flash of lightning showed him a pale figure standing there. It didn't look like Emily Northridge.

It looked like a ghost—like the ghost in the videotape.

Kelso blinked. He knew he was awake, it was no dream. He reached with his free hand and turned on the bedside lamp. And stared.

It wasn't Emily Northridge.

It was her dead grandmother's ghost.

In the glow of the lamp, an old, old woman stood facing him, just inside the bedroom door. Her ancient body was covered with something filmy and white, like gauze, that seemed to billow around her as she slowly raised and lowered her frail arms. Stringy white hair framed a face that was hardly more than a skull—cheeks hollow, eyes nothing but dark sunken pits, thin lips pulled back in a grimace to expose yellowed teeth. As Kelso watched, gripping the .45, the thing's teeth moved open and shut with a clicking sound, *click click click*, and an old woman's frail, grating, rasping voice met his ears:

"Sergeant Kelso . . . I've been waiting for you . . . I'm Lydia . . . Emily's grandmother . . . I'm going to kill you, Sergeant Kelso . . ."

Then Kelso saw that the ghost held a knife in one pale bony hand. The lamplight glinted on its long, sharp blade as she raised it high over her head and began moving towards him.

Kelso hesitated for maybe five seconds, temporarily frozen in a combination of amazement and incredulity.

Then he calmly swung his legs out of the bed, stood up, and walked past the ghost to the wall. He flipped the wall switch, turned, and examined the specter in the full glare of the overhead light.

It waved its arms and menaced him with the knife, making a low, rasping moan.

"You can put the knife down now, Lydia. I know who you are."

For a moment the old woman stared at him. Then, abruptly, she lowered her arms, dropped the knife to the floor, and covered her emaciated face with both gnarled hands.

"Emily made me do it," she said, her voice quavering. "Emily made me do it."

"I know," Kelso told her. "It's all right now. Why don't you sit down and tell me about it? Nobody's going to hurt you."

"Emily made me," the old lady moaned and began to sob.

Kelso quickly slipped into his corduroy pants, a sweatshirt and slippers, holstered the .45 at his hip, and led the old lady downstairs to the kitchen. He got her into a chair, boiled water, and made her a cup of tea. By the time she'd sipped half the cup, she'd calmed down and was ready to talk.

"You didn't kill Dr. Ahlberg, did you?" Kelso said, more a statement than a question.

"No. That was Emily."

"And she killed him because . . ."

"She was afraid he'd find me here."

"Who was killed instead of you, ten years ago, when you were supposedly murdered?"

The old lady's hands shook as she held the cup to her withered lips. She sipped more tea. "An old lady. A homeless person. Just an old lady nobody knew. Emily brought her here to the house, promised her food. Nobody knew her. Emily . . . stuck a knife in her. Put my clothes on her. Dead old ladies look alike. Emily's doctor signed the death certificate. They even had a funeral for me. A closed casket." She started to sob again.

Kelso stared. "And you went along with all this?"

"Emily paid me to keep quiet. I never had nothing. After my husband died, I was poor. Emily's my only relative. She gave me money, let me live here."

"But why?"

"So I could haunt the house." She sobbed harder.

Kelso patted her gently on the shoulder, not too hard, he didn't want to knock her over. She felt light as a feather.

"Don't cry," Kelso said. "It's all right. So, Emily got you to haunt this house?"

"Only once in a while. Only on certain nights. She'd have a friend over, they'd explore the house, I'd make an appearance. I have a little room up-

stairs. If you open the door it looks like a closet, but the back of the closet's another door, goes into my room."

"My God," Kelso said. "Emily kept you here? Against your will? In a hidden room?"

"No, no, not against my will . . . I'm old, I have no money; she let me stay here and brought me food if I'd haunt the place for her once in a while."

"And she videotaped you?"

"Yes. To show some of her friends."

"And nobody ever found you out?"

"I was careful not to appear for long. Just a glimpse was enough, in low light, a few moans, wave my arms, go away again. People she brought here, they believed, they wanted to believe, they wanted to see a ghost. She didn't bring doubters or skeptics." The old lady coughed. "Until that man. That Dr. Ahlberg."

Kelso nodded. "Emily was between a rock and a hard place, wasn't she? She'd publicly challenged Ahlberg after he called her a fraud, she had to let him stay here. But she was afraid he'd find you, and the 'ghost' would be exposed."

"Yes. She was afraid he'd find me." She began to cry softly again. "But I didn't kill him. I didn't kill him."

Kelso shook his head and almost smiled—Leill was going to be furious when he found out his crime-scene people had missed the old lady's hidden room. He looked at her.

"There's one thing I don't get. Why go to all this trouble? Why didn't Emily just take you out of the house while Ahlberg stayed here? Then he wouldn't have found you."

"She was afraid if she took me out, somebody might see me," the old lady sobbed. "She thinks I'm not right in my head. Thought I'd wander off. It was safer to keep me here."

"So, you've been living here, hiding here, for ten years." Kelso shook his head. "I had a sneaking suspicion it might be you. At first, when Emily told me there wasn't a mirror in the house, I couldn't figure out why she'd kept them out of the place for ten years. And then it hit me. No mirrors, because you might still be alive and in this house . . ."

"I hate mirrors," Lydia said. "They make you old." She sniffed loudly. Her sobs subsided again.

"Are you all right now?" Kelso asked. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm all right."

"One last question. Did Emily tell you to kill me tonight?"

"No, no, no . . . just scare you away, that's all . . . just scare you away . . ."

"And you couldn't even do *that* right!" a harsh voice said loudly.

Kelso had been preoccupied with the old lady, feeling sorry for her, trying to keep her calm enough to answer his questions. He hadn't watched the door or listened for footsteps over the distant rumble of thunder. His head snapped around. Emily Northridge stood framed in the kitchen

doorway, holding a small snub-nosed revolver. Her attractive features were twisted with anger.

The old lady looked up. "Emily," she stammered. "But I tried . . . I did what you said . . ."

"Shut up, Lydia!" Emily glared at her, then at Kelso. "Well, Sergeant, I was going to have you murdered in your bed by the ghost, but now I guess it'll have to be here in the kitchen. Too bad you couldn't sleep, and had to come down for a nightcap." She cocked back the hammer on the revolver with a loud click.

"Hello, Miss Northridge," Kelso said. "I figured you'd turn up sooner or later."

"You're so damn smart."

Kelso let his right hand slide slowly towards his holster, but Emily Northridge saw it.

"Put your hands on the table, Sergeant!"

He did.

Then, not taking her eyes off Kelso and aiming the revolver steadily at him, she said, "Lydia! Where's that stupid knife?"

"It's up in the bedroom, Emily." The old lady's voice trembled. "I'm so tired . . . can't I go to bed now?"

"No! We have to get rid of this guy. Go get the knife, Lydia. Oh, what am I thinking? Forget that one. Just get another one from the drawer there."

"Going to stick a knife in me?" Kelso asked casually. "Right here in the kitchen?"

"Lydia's going to do it," Emily Northridge said. "She's said too much. She *knows* too much. Lydia, listen to me. You didn't kill that old bag I brought here, or Dr. Ahlberg, but you helped, both times. That makes you an accessory to two murders. Isn't that right, Sergeant?"

Kelso saw the old lady's skeletal features grimace with fear.

"So," Emily continued, "we're going to make you a *real* accessory. You're going to stick a knife in this jerk."

"I can't," Lydia moaned. "I can't . . . don't ask me to do that, Emily . . . I can't . . ."

"Damn it, Lydia, shut up and get the knife! Do it!"

Kelso stayed seated, both hands flat on the tabletop, sitting up straight. "I think that's about enough, Miss Northridge." He looked at the old lady. "Lydia? Will you testify in court all the things you told me here tonight? If I promise nothing will happen to you?"

"Get the knife, Lydia!" Emily Northridge snapped.

"Lydia? Will you testify against Emily in court?"

"Yes," the old woman moaned, sobbing again. "Yes. I will. I will."

"In that case, Lydia," Emily Northridge said, "you'll have to die, too!" She swung the revolver away from Kelso and pointed it at her grandmother.

It was the instant Kelso had hoped for.

He had his knees up, his slippered feet against the underside of the kitchen table.

The second he saw Emily move the revolver, he kicked the table over. It struck Emily Northridge, knocking her backwards.

The revolver went off. A bullet slammed into the kitchen wall.

Somebody screamed—Kelso guessed it was Emily; he couldn't imagine a scream like that coming out of the old lady.

Then Kelso was over the table and lunging at Emily Northridge, tackling her. As he fell on top of her, her hand hit the floor and the revolver clattered away across the tiles.

Emily Northridge screamed again, and Kelso realized it was a scream of rage. She fought like a wild woman, clawing and kicking and screaming. She tried to bite him. It took him several moments to get her up on her feet with both arms pinned securely behind her back. Even then, she twisted and turned and tried to kick backwards at him.

"Lydia," Kelso said, panting, "would you please go to the phone and call the police?"

That weekend, George Kelso spent Saturday night with Susan Overstreet at her aunt's house. Sunday was his birthday, and Aunt Eleanor had planned a big dinner. Before going to bed, he and Susan sat in the living room and chatted for a while with her aunt as the old lady rocked in her rocking chair by the fireplace.

"What'll happen to Emily's grandmother?" Susan wanted to know.

"Nothing, probably," Kelso said. "I'm not sure she's really right in her head. And Emily Northridge basically forced her to go along with the whole scheme, just so she could make money from her so-called haunted house."

"If you ask me," Susan said, "that Northridge woman's not right in her head, either. She didn't need some poor old lady to bilk the public with a ghost story. She sounds perfectly evil."

Aunt Eleanor rocked by the fire, back and forth, back and forth, her rocker creaking and creaking. "She didn't need a pretend ghost anyway. There are real ghosts all over the place. No need for pretend ghosts. My Herbert, for example . . ."

"Are you about ready for bed, George?" Susan asked quickly.

Kelso made a huge yawn. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"Why don't you go on up, George? I want to say something to Aunt Eleanor, and I'll be up in a minute."

"Okay."

"You two aren't planning to sleep in separate rooms or anything foolish like that, are you?" the old lady asked, her pale eyes dancing impishly behind her little round glasses.

"Don't be silly, Aunt Eleanor," Susan said. "Of course not. After all, we're practically married." She smirked at Kelso.

He smiled sheepishly and went upstairs. Another storm threatened; he heard the wind howling outside the windows. He brushed his teeth, undressed to shorts and T-shirt, and climbed into the big comfortable bed in Aunt Eleanor's guest room. He felt tired and relaxed and found himself starting to doze off, thinking about ghosts . . .

At the foot of the bed, something grabbed his toe.

Kelso yelled, jerked his knees up, then sat up in bed and stared, wide-eyed, at the figure standing at the foot of his bed.

"What the hell . . . ?"

It was Susan, grinning at him.

"Susan! Don't ever do that to me! You scared me to death!"

Laughing, she came over and gave him a quick kiss. "Sorry, George. It was only a joke."

"Well, it wasn't funny."

"Oh, don't be an old grouch." After a moment she climbed into bed beside him and lowered her voice. "Aunt Eleanor's down there looking for Uncle Herbert in the fire."

The wind subsided. In the quietness, Kelso could hear the creaking of the old lady's chair as she rocked back and forth, back and forth, and he knew she was peering into the flames, waiting to see her dead husband's ghost.

Important Notice to Subscribers: Please direct all change of address or other subscription inquiries to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Please send us your current mailing label and new address.

For Back Issues: Send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Suite 100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

FICTION

JACKS

L. A. Wilson, Jr.



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/02

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jacks stood in the middle of the narrow dirt road watching the distant headlights meander slowly toward him. A cool northeast wind chilled him but couldn't chill the blackness that raged in his heart and in his head. The SUV stopped about twenty feet ahead, and its perplexed driver, who could probably only see an indistinct image of him, got out cursing.

"Federal agent!" Jacks yelled, allowing the badge in his left hand to reflect the glare of the headlights. "Step away from the vehicle!"

The driver had stopped cursing and took two steps away from the SUV, leaving the door open and the motor running. He was a big man and dressed much like Jacks, in a camouflage jacket and pants and wearing combat boots.

"What you want with us?" the man asked. "We ain't broke no law."

"Get the rest of 'em out the vehicle," Jacks ordered. He brushed his jacket back and let his right hand rest on his revolver.

The interior lights revealed four other passengers, one in the front and three in the back. None of them appeared threatening at the moment, but he knew that would change.

The man in the front seat got out first. He was at least six foot four, big and burly, looked like a bear. The Confederate flag on his T-shirt matched the plate on the front bumper. He didn't wear a jacket. He looked like one of those malcontents who defied everything from the system to the elements.

"You don't look like no god-

damned agent to me." The big man squinted trying to get a better focus on Jacks.

Jacks ignored him and waited for the men in the back to exit. He caught sight of a glint of metal in the hand of one of the men in the back. It could have been a gun, but it didn't matter. He needed an excuse and he welcomed this one. He jerked the revolver from its holster and fired past the big man, smashing the head of the guy exiting with the metal.

Everybody froze for a split second. The big man's eyes were as big as saucers. Two other men scrambled out of the backseat. One did a forward roll toward the woods, and the other just took off running. Jacks dropped both of them from the back without a warning.

The sound of the SUV's engine revving jerked him around just in time to see it barreling toward him. The driver had jumped back in and was trying to run him down. He turned and put one shot through the windshield, dropped his badge and reached for his shoulder holster with his left hand, and followed it with two more shots before the left fender knocked him ten feet back into the brush.

A sheet of pain racked his body like a fiery tourniquet. He lay there taking short quick breaths. He didn't know if he could move. He didn't want to try.

A dark shadow came toward him. It picked him up and threw him back toward the road. More pain. More pain.

"You ain't dead yet? You ain't dead yet?" the big man kept asking

as he repeatedly plunged his fists into Jacks' face.

The big man started to hit him again but suddenly hesitated. He grabbed Jacks' collar and dragged him out of the shadows and into the moonlight.

"Well I'll just be goddamned," he said, as he finally was able to see Jacks' skin through the smear of greasepaint.

Jacks was never at a loss for weaponry. The big man's lapse was his downfall. Jacks reached under his left arm for his last revolver. He put four bullets in the overlapping belly and prayed the man would fall in the other direction.

Jacks struggled to his feet. His ribs hurt. His arms hurt. His back hurt. Something had to be broken. The SUV had crossed the road and crashed into a tree. The motor was still running. The driver had been thrown to the floor in a bloody clump. One look told Jacks he wouldn't be moving again.

He opened the side door and was beginning to collect the weapons that had been hastily jammed under the seat when a movement in his peripheral vision made him want to jump—but he was hurting too bad to make a sudden move. He climbed toward the rear and glimpsed a small bare foot. Someone was lying on the floor.

Jacks moved as quickly as he could bear. He slid around the seat with the revolver ready to fire. He hesitated for a moment, then thought he shouldn't have. It was a woman. She was half-dressed and dirty. They had probably taken turns abusing her.

He could smell her without getting close to her. He didn't like killing women. He didn't know why. He liked to think that there was still some decency left in him, but he hoped it wasn't much. Decency could get a man killed.

She was trembling. She looked terrified.

"I won't tell," she whimpered.

"I know," he answered.

The woman disappeared into the darkness of the narrow dirt road, still barefoot and probably so grateful to be left alive that she didn't really care what Jacks was doing. He wasn't very concerned about her talking. By the time she got to the settlement a few miles away, he'd be long gone. The smeared body paint mixed with blood that camouflaged his face didn't allow for much of a description anyway.

The key was in the SUV exactly where he had been told it would be, wedged under the rocker panel on the driver's side. He collected IDs from the dead men because of some morbid need to know who he had killed. He only dwelled on the names and pictures a moment before torching the SUV, then stood there a while watching it burn. They didn't have real fire departments in those rural hamlets, just volunteers with obsolete tanker trucks. Nobody was going to waste water on a fire that wasn't a real threat to anything of value. There wouldn't be much left when it was over. He liked it that way.

ONE WEEK LATER

Jacks sat in the holding area waiting for them to arrive with

Pookie. His cousin was forty years old and they still called him Pookie. It was a testament of sorts to the kind of person he had become.

"You better leave that boy alone. You done had enough trouble of your own. You don't need that too."

That's what Pookie's mother had said to him, and that should have been a warning by itself.

"Pookie just don't want to work. Every time he get a job, it's the same thing, and it's always 'cause he black. He the only black man I know that goes around accusing black people of being prejudiced against him."

That's what his sister said, but Pookie said he didn't do anything, and Jacks just didn't think his cousin was bright enough to embezzle a quarter-million dollars from right under the noses of some of the sharpest minds in the telecommunications industry. Besides, he couldn't look at Pookie without thinking about the kid with whom he had grown up, who would jump into a fight on his behalf without hesitation when the big kids tried to take his lunch money.

He shuddered a bit as he looked around at the bars and metal screens. He hated being confined even when he knew he was free to leave. It reminded him of hospitals; he hated places where he had spent too much of his life. He looked at his watch. It was taking them forever to bring Pookie down. His medication was beginning to wear off, and he didn't have another dose with him.

Douglas Edmonds seemed oblivious to his handcuffs as he was ush-

ered into the room and the table where Jacks sat. His face was hopeful, even excited.

"You get it?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jacks whispered, hoping his demeanor would encourage Pookie to lower his voice. "What's it to?"

"I don't know," Pookie answered with exaggerated indignation. "That's what you got to find out."

"What!?" This time it was Jacks' voice that rose to the point that it garnered the guard's unwelcome attention. "Do you know what it took to get this?" He continued much more softly. "Look, I'm only in this because nobody else thinks your sorry ass is worth the effort, so don't test me."

"Hey, all I know is something's up with those two. That redneck hangs around Roderick's office twenty-four seven just like I told you. Nothing but suits up there, but that scab could walk in any time he wanted to. I heard Roderick tell him to guard that key with his life because everything they had could be unlocked with it. That was just before they had me arrested. They know I didn't steal anything from them. They think I heard something. They think I know more than I do. Why didn't you ask that redneck what the key opens? Why don't you go find him and ask him?"

Jacks sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had dug himself a deeper hole than he had intended. He didn't need to tell Pookie what he had done. Perhaps he shouldn't have done it, but these were Klansmen—white supremacists. No black man was going to walk up to

them and make requests of them. Anyway, he had killed more important people in the war and for less well defined reasons. The ease with which he still accomplished it disturbed him, however, but he didn't dwell on it. It didn't seem so bad when he took his medicine.

"I can't right now. I don't know where he is," Jacks lied.

Pookie's eyes suddenly turned desperate as Jacks' confession seemed to snatch away some of his hope.

"You got to find him, Riley. You got to find him and find where they hid everything. That's what it's gonna take to get me out, and you got to get me out of here, Riley," he pleaded. "You don't know what it's like in here. You don't know."

"I'm trying, Pookie. I'll talk to you in a day or two."

He watched the dejection in his cousin's slumping shoulders as they led him away, and the guilt overwhelmed him. He should have been able to offer him more hope. He should have been able to offer him something. Blood is thicker than mud, they always said. Maybe it really was.

Vincent Roderick occupied the eleventh floor of a recently renovated edifice on Peachtree Street. It was a place that shouted money with abundant backlit logos dominating its contemporary architecture.

It had taken two days to get an appointment with Roderick. He seemed an impatient bastard who had little tolerance for things not immediately within his scope of in-

terest. Jacks was greeted but not welcomed.

"Riley Jacks . . . *Officer Riley Jacks*," he mused, as he perused the name in his appointment book. "Is this a police matter?" Roderick regarded him with a hint of a knowing smirk. It was that look rich people muster when they perceive themselves to be interacting with their inferiors.

Jacks wanted to leap over the desk and slap him, but the tranquilizer coursing through his veins halted him. The man was playing him. Anybody who had access to a newspaper over the past five years knew he wasn't a policeman anymore. Police brutality, nervous breakdown, dismissal from the force—it had been played and re-played in the news media ad nauseam.

"No, sir. I'm here about a private matter—Douglas Edmonds."

Roderick paused with a concerned but insincere frown, then went into a prolonged soliloquy about how disappointed he had been, what a good employee Pookie had been, how much potential he had, and how the company had been so dedicated to equal opportunity employment. The smirk, however, never left his lips.

Jacks absorbed as much of it as he could stand before asking him about a name from one of the driver's licenses he had collected. Throwing a dead man's name at him should have been enough to get him rattled. Roderick had no reason to suspect that any of their names were familiar to anyone beyond his immediate circle. Jacks

needed to make this man wonder if his business, whatever it was, may have leaked beyond Pookie, and to question whether there was any advantage in pressing such an issue that could draw more attention than was desired.

"You know a man named Trent Davie?"

The smirk washed away from Roderick's face along with most of the blood. It was better than a slap.

"You seen him lately?" Jacks continued without waiting for an answer to the first question.

"I never heard of him, and just what the hell do you want?" Roderick's voice had suddenly become hostile.

"I want my cousin out of jail and the charges dropped. You know he didn't steal any money from you." Jacks' gaze burned back into Roderick's eyes intently so that he could make no mistake about his resolve.

"I don't have anything to do with that."

"You're a Harvard graduate, Mr. Roderick. Maybe you could figure something out, say, by ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

Jacks stood and left without giving Roderick a chance to reply. He figured he had put something on the man's mind. Pookie was a low-level employee who worked in accounts. He could only be worth a limited amount of trouble. If he really needed a scapegoat, maybe this would encourage him to find somebody else to blame.

The four dead men and the burned-out SUV made the national news, but that wasn't what was

on Jacks' mind. He was on the interstate highway racing toward Grady Hospital. He had gotten a call at ten A.M., and he knew immediately that his hand had been called. He was good at jungle warfare, but the urban battleground had always been problematic for him. That's why things hadn't worked out for him on the police force. Now Pookie was either dead or dying, the victim of a homemade knife in a place where nobody ever saw anything. It was all his fault, trying to play games of intimidation with men who thought the lives of lesser men were theirs to use and discard at their pleasure. He had played the game before. It was a game of wills. It had been an easy game in the war, where enemies were well-defined and the risk of retribution was limited and clear. He was beginning to learn that this game was different. He didn't know how different yet.

The car behind him was following too closely. He changed lanes and watched it slide behind him in the heavy traffic. He switched back again and accelerated. The car matched his moves. They were following him and didn't care if he knew. He started to pull to the left around a slower car in front of him, but a second car had moved in the lane beside him. The two men inside were well dressed and wearing dark glasses. The man in the passenger seat stared intently at him for several seconds and waved him toward the exit ramp.

Jacks glanced again at the other car in the rearview mirror, then jammed his brakes abruptly. The

trailing car slammed into his rear. The car to his left had traveled several yards ahead before stopping. Jacks jumped from his car and headed for the vehicle at his rear. Two lanes of the rush-hour traffic had come to a stop. Cursing drivers were beginning to climb out of their cars, but those who could see the revolver in Jacks' hand climbed back inside and started trying to work their way over to the emergency lane, making the traffic tie-up even worse.

The driver was trying to get out of the car, but he was hung between the seat belt and the airbag. Jacks snatched the door open. The passenger was reaching for something under his coat until he saw Jacks' gun.

"You're making a mistake," the man said.

Jacks reached under the driver's coat and retrieved a gun.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked as he scrutinized the weapon. Criminals carried more heat than that. This was a police weapon. The men from the other car were making their way back to him. He reached in the man's jacket pocket and retrieved his wallet. FBI. These men were FBI agents.

He holstered his weapon and helped the injured agent out of his car.

The two agents racing from the front of the line of cars manhandled Jacks, pushed him against the car, patted him down, confiscated his pistol, and led him away in handcuffs. He didn't resist. Some battles couldn't be won and didn't need to be fought.

He wondered how they had traced the dead men to him so fast. What mistakes had he made? What clues had he left behind? He was shocked when he realized that the car wasn't heading in the direction of the jail. They were on a surface street, Spring Street, heading into the parking garage of the Federal Office Building.

His cuffs were removed, and he was seated in a small conference room. Two men entered, one suited and the other with shirtsleeves rolled up and wearing inexpensive braces. The man with the shirtsleeves carried a folder which he reviewed briefly before introducing himself as Randolph Celosia.

"We can do this either the easy way or the hard way, Mr. Jacks," he began in a sharp staccato voice. "If we do it the hard way, I'm gonna have your P.I. license and have you cool your heels in jail until we remember to get you out." He paused and looked up briefly. "I don't want to do that," he added.

Jacks hoped that he looked properly perplexed because he didn't have a clue where this was going. All he knew now was that it probably wasn't about the men he had killed.

"Douglas Edmonds had his throat cut this morning. He's alive, but his brain may be permanently damaged, and he probably won't recover. I'm sorry," he added parenthetically and almost sincerely. "If you think Vincent Roderick had something to do with the attack on your cousin, you're probably right,

but I don't want you in this in any way, shape, or form. Do we understand each other?"

"My cousin didn't steal any money from Roderick."

"We know that and a lot more," the agent replied. "But that doesn't change anything. We know Edmonds had you trying to intervene on his behalf, trying to get Roderick to let him off the hook for the trumped-up embezzlement charge. Roderick is under federal investigation. We don't need and we won't have any free agents interfering because of their personal agendas."

"What's Roderick under investigation for?" Jacks asked.

"That information is available on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know squat."

"Am I under arrest or what?" Jacks asked as he tried to swallow the agent's last remark.

"Not yet," Celosia replied. "Maybe you can answer one thing for us. Why did Roderick target Edmonds for the embezzlement fall? What did Edmonds think about it?"

"He thought Roderick did him because he was black. You people have a propensity for that kind of activity. It was Roderick who was trying to hide his company's money. Pookie . . . Edmonds discovered it in an account he was working." Jacks traded stares with Celosia for several seconds before the agent looked away.

"You may be right," the agent replied. "Roderick's a white supremacist. His company only hires token minorities in order to maintain a front. I'm sure he and his people had plans for that money."

"Since nobody seems to know where the money is, I guess they still do," Jacks said.

The agent just sat there tight-lipped as Jacks knew he would. The FBI wasn't giving away anything even accidentally. With Pookie dead, the missing money could be used with impunity with no remaining links to its origin. But who had the money, and who knew about it? The FBI damn sure didn't. Jacks smiled, and he knew Celosia didn't understand why.

It was a death watch. What else could it be called? Jacks' aunt sat in the ICU with her head resting on Pookie's bed and sobbing. Pookie was unrecognizable. His head seemed swollen to twice its normal size with tubes hanging out of almost every visible orifice. The only thing keeping him alive was the ventilator moving air in and out of his chest. Jacks nodded at the assorted relatives that overflowed the waiting room. He didn't go inside to see Pookie. There was no point to it. Pookie didn't know he was still in the world and probably wouldn't ever again.

He turned to go and felt the key still in his pocket. Pookie knew about the key. He had seen Roderick pass it to the redneck and knew what it was for, but how had he known that the redneck had hidden it under the rocker panel of the SUV?

The question just made Jacks leave the hospital that much sooner. There was a dark car across the street with someone sitting inside. They were watching him. They

were following him. He got a soda from the Coke machine and popped the pill he had been carrying with him. It was hard sometimes to tell what was real and what was only in his head. He fondled the handle of his pistol for reassurance. Sometimes he wasn't even sure it mattered.

Jacks found himself on an isolated dirt road in south Georgia again. His paranoia was working overtime. He was constantly checking his rearview mirror to see if he was being followed. Somebody had been watching his apartment—the FBI, Roderick's people—he couldn't be sure. He wasn't even sure why he was here. Nobody seemed to know the depth of his involvement. They were all concentrating on Pookie, who still lay in a coma. The FBI concentrated on Roderick and his nefarious dealings. But he had a key and a burning curiosity as to what it might open.

The woman's face tightened as if she had seen a ghost. He had hoped to find her, but couldn't imagine the good fortune of finding her so easily. The dirt road had finally connected with a two-laned black-topped highway with a short segment that was crowded by one-story buildings, none of which seemed to have been constructed within the last forty years. Jacks had wandered in one store and out another suffering the curious stares of residents who instantly recognized him as an outsider.

He saw her in the sparsely visited hardware store, working behind the counter. She seemed briefly con-

fused but apparently quickly made up her mind to run for it. Jacks moved quickly but with deliberate calm. He was out of his element, and this was not the place for a black man to chase down a white woman in the street.

He cornered her in a back room before she could exit.

"What are you doin' here?" she asked.

The lack of fear in her voice confused him.

"You can't be here," she added.

"I'm looking for you," he informed her.

"They may be watchin' this place. You gon' get us in trouble."

"Who's watching?"

She didn't answer, but drew away and folded her arms defensively.

"What were you doing in the truck with Trent Davie?"

"What did it look like?"

"Look, I'm Riley Jacks . . ."

"I know who you are," she interrupted.

"How?"

"You're Douglas's cousin."

Jacks just stood there looking puzzled.

"I used to live in Atlanta. I worked in Vincent Roderick's office before I moved back here."

"Somebody cut Douglas's throat. He's probably dead by now."

She tried to swallow and almost choked. She started trembling.

"Oh Lord," she moaned. "Oh Lord."

That knowledge did something to her. She went back into the store and made some excuse to her employer, then sneaked out of the

back with Jacks. There was nowhere to go in a place that small, so they drove down the road, found a partially overgrown path, and parked.

Her name was Traci Fellows, and she had the hots for Pookie. She was the person that Pookie had confided in about the money that was being diverted from Roderick's company. But Traci had a secret that she kept close to the vest until now.

"You were getting paid by the FBI?" Jacks asked incredulously.

"They got me the job, because they knew I was from down here."

"Down here? Down here where you, Trent Davie, and all his white supremacist cronies live. And you're a paid FBI informant."

"They were buyin' guns. Everybody knew that. Roderick grew up right down the road from here. He's still got people that live around here. They all believe there's gon' be a race war. Roderick was using his company's money to help Trent Davie stockpile guns. He couldn't let nobody know because they're about to go public, you know, have their stock sold on the stock exchange."

"So, did you know where Trent Davie kept the key?"

"Yeah, I used to go with Trent."

"You told Pookie where to find the key. I don't get that part."

"I ain't no racist, Mr. Jacks. All Trent wanted to do was spend that money on keeping black folks down. Douglas would have spent that money on me."

Jacks sighed and shook his head. It was an age-old story of a woman

scorned. Pookie had more guts than he had ever given him credit for. He had convinced the woman to double-cross the FBI, and they were going to rip off Roderick's diverted money. What bothered him the most, however, was the realization that he must have been a part of the plan. Pookie must have assumed that a bond of blood would not allow his cousin to walk away from him. He also knew that on confronting the likes of Trent Davie and his group, his cousin's violent past and psychological flaws would lead him to go off the deep end and kill everybody, if that's what it took. Pookie just hadn't counted on Roderick using his arrest as a method of isolating him and having him killed.

"What does the key open?" Jacks asked.

Just as the question left his lips a dark car drove past the small path, then backed up to scrutinize it again. There was nowhere to go except forward, and Jacks had no idea where the path led.

His car bounced along the dirt path, sliding into mudholes and crashing through overgrown brush so thick that it blinded his course. The woman seemed in sheer terror as she strained to see the approaching car. She was stuck in the middle with nowhere to hide. She had double-crossed the rednecks and double-crossed the Feds. Jacks didn't trust her, because he suspected that within a heartbeat she would double-cross him.

He was running out of room rapidly. A wall of trees lay ahead of them.

"Over there!" the woman shouted. "Across the field!"

Jacks made a sharp right turn across a treeless field with knee-deep grass and weeds. His car dug its own trail in the irregular terrain. For the first time, the dark car broke into the clearing. It was a new black Ford LTD with tinted windows—not the vehicle of choice for the local high school drop-out crowd. This was a Fed car. He didn't know if they were after him or the woman, but he didn't want to find out right away.

They bounced across a ditch that threatened to break the car's axles and somehow survived.

"The key, goddammit!" Jacks yelled at the woman. "What does it open? It's now or never."

"Turn right on Bent Creek Road," she said. "Hell, we're going to get killed either way."

Jacks floored the accelerator as soon as he got on a level surface, putting some distance between him and the LTD before it also entered the highway. He suspected where she was taking him, but he knew for sure when he saw the farmhouse, barn, and surrounding barbed-wire fence. He jumped from the car and saw the shock on the faces of the startled men, who watched him with hostility.

"How the hell are we going to get out of here?" he asked her.

"I got you in," she whispered. "It's up to you to get us out. Follow me."

"Federal agent!" Jacks yelled as he held the fake badge high enough for everyone to see.

"This here's private property." An armed, bearded man challenged

him without pulling his weapon. "You ain't got no right to come up here."

"Sue me," Jacks retorted, while continuing to follow the woman toward the house.

"Where's your search warrant?" the man continued.

Jacks brushed back his coat revealing one of his guns, but didn't stop walking.

The woman was on the steps of the front porch now. Three other men were coming closer with weapons drawn.

"What's goin' on here, Ralph?"

"You ain't carryin' your black ass in that house, federal agent or not. You can't git all of us."

Jacks' eyes narrowed. He slid his pistol out of its holster and stepped sufficiently close to the man who'd challenged him so that he blocked the others' line of fire.

"I'm just gonna kill you, Ralph . . . nobody else . . . just you. After that, it won't matter. My back-up will take care of the rest of these boys."

At that very moment the roar of the LTD's engine snapped Ralph's head around. It was long enough for Jacks to crash through the front door, dragging the woman with him.

"Where?" he yelled as she led him through the house, which was obviously familiar to her.

She moved swiftly into the kitchen, and through a side door leading to the basement.

Jacks became aware of his heart pounding. A basement could be a one-way trap. He didn't know if he could shoot his way out of a place

like this. He wished he had remembered to take his medicine that morning.

The basement was stacked with boxes—hundreds of them. This was what the Feds were looking for—pistols, rifles, explosives—ordnance for the coming race war.

That wasn't what Jacks was interested in, however. His eyes searched the walls desperately in the dim light. There was no gunfire. That was bad news. That meant that they were talking—that the rednecks didn't have the guts to go up against a carload of FBI agents. That meant that someone would be coming down the steps at any moment. That meant that he would have to decide if he had the guts to go up against whoever was coming.

The door was under the stairwell. He shoved the key in the deadbolt lock and grappled for a light switch. A naked bulb illuminated the almost empty crawl space.

"You see it? Do you see it?" the woman asked anxiously.

An old suitcase lay on the floor. He found papers—mostly hate literature, old bank deposit slips showing a few thousand dollars in a checking account, and a wallet with five hundred dollars in cash inside.

"What do you see?" the woman asked and tried to squeeze into the narrow space with him.

Jacks shifted his weight in order to block the entrance. He rifled through the side pockets of the suitcase and crammed what he could retrieve into his pocket but left the money.

"There's nothing there," he announced as he backed out of the narrow space.

The woman looked at him suspiciously. "There's money in there! I know it is! I've seen him put it in there."

"Five hundred dollars in an old suitcase. Chump change," Jacks explained. "See for yourself," he added.

He slipped the bits of paper and other items into the side of his shoe when the woman scrambled into the closet. Her curses spewed out of the crawl space as he slipped his weapons off and held them over his head.

"Nothing but guns and explosives in here," he shouted to the FBI agents descending the stairs.

"I told you to stay out of this, Jacks," a familiar staccato voice said.

One of the agents took his guns and patted him down. Another cornered the startled woman.

"You arresting me?" Jacks asked.

"You almost messed this up for us," the lead agent mused as he surveyed the cache of weapons. "What'd you think you'd find here, Traci? Vincent Roderick's money? Is that why you tried to double-cross us? You figure you and Edmonds could outsmart everybody? Hell, you're lucky Davie didn't kill your ass. What'd they do, fall out with each other?"

He got close to her and grinned his breath into her face. "One thing I couldn't figure out when we found the bodies and that burned-out truck. Were they fighting over the money or over you?"

She tried to spit in his face but missed. He grinned at her, but it was a humorless, angry grin.

"Am I under arrest?" Jacks asked again.

The lead agent turned to Jacks and stared at him long and hard. "I got what I came for—the guns and a connection with Vincent Roderick. Get out of here, Jacks. I don't want to see you again."

Traci started to follow, and the agent stepped in front of her. She looked at Jacks with one of those longing, helpless gazes.

Jacks backed away. There's something about the way a man's face looks when he's disappointed in a woman. There was more disappointment in Celosia's face than should have been expected from the failures of a paid informant. He suspected that the conversion of Traci to an informant had involved more than just a meeting in the FBI office and the exchange of money. It undoubtedly pissed him off that she had chucked it all for greed and Pookie.

Jacks walked past the livid red-necks handcuffed to the porch, ran to his car, and headed north to Atlanta. When he was sure he wasn't being followed, he pulled to the side of the road and dug into his shoe to retrieve the slips of paper and the narrow oblong key he had found in a side pocket of the suitcase. It was a peculiar key—the kind they use to open safe-deposit boxes. The old deposit slips told him which bank it was. All he had to do was to beat it to the bank before Roderick got wind that the FBI had found his

cache of weapons and were hot on his trail.

Pookie was probably dead by now. Traci had pissed the FBI off so much, they would be harassing her butt for quite some time. It would be a shame to let all of that money go to waste. Suddenly he realized that he hadn't taken his medicine all day. He smiled broadly. Suddenly he realized that he didn't need it.

Jacks waited two days before showing up at the bank. He wanted to let things shake out a bit and see which way the wind was blowing.

Roderick had gone down in less than twelve hours. The Feds dragged him out of his corporate office in handcuffs. The woman's testimony would likely seal his fate. The guns, the embezzled money, Pookie's murder—Roderick was the only one left alive so he was going to have to take the fall for all of them.

The bank official scrutinized his key and compared it to her own before leading Jacks back to the vault. She removed the deposit box and left him in a small private room to peruse its contents. It was money, as much as he could have hoped for—two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Jacks wasted no time transferring it to his briefcase, thanked the lady, and walked away.

The farther he got away from the bank, the broader his grin became.

It was free money—like hitting the lottery. Poor Pookie had given his life for it, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

"My man!" the security guard at his condo greeted him. "If I had your hand I'd throw mine in," he grinned.

"What?" Jacks regarded him suspiciously.

"Go on, bro. You know you the man. The women probably think your farts don't stink." He laughed.

Jacks took the elevator up. The guard had him for a moment. He liked to shoot the bull with everybody. "Sonuvabitch," Jacks muttered. He should have been putting that energy into doing his job.

Jacks had just sat the briefcase on the dining room table when a shadow teased his eye. He reached for his gun, but a threat restrained him.

"I wouldn't," the voice said.

He turned slowly and met Traci Fellows circling to his right and pointing a small caliber automatic pistol at him. She sat calmly at the opposite side of the table, keeping the pistol belly-high. She was dressed to turn heads and made up to shatter a man's concentration. He knew now what the security guard meant. If a woman waved the right thing under a man's nose, she could talk him in to anything.

"Suppose you take, say, fifty thousand, hand me the rest, and we'll call it a day. Fair enough?" Her voice was firm and confident. The damsel in distress had disappeared.

"Fair?" Jacks asked. "Why should you get anything just because you're holding a gun? You think fifty thousand is gonna keep me from coming after you?"

"I'm trying to be nice, Jacks. After

all, you did do me quite a favor. Okay, I'll make it sixty. How's that?"

"Favor?" Jacks asked, not wanting to let her see how perplexed he was but unable to help himself.

"Surely you don't think your dumb-ass cousin was responsible for you getting your hands on that money."

Jacks sat down. That sinking feeling of having been had began churning in his stomach.

"It's my money, Jacks. Mine!" Traci informed him. "Shooting it out up here won't get either of us anything, no matter who survives."

"Fifty-fifty," Jacks offered.

"A hundred twenty-five thousand dollars ain't squat," Traci complained.

"It's better than nothing, and that's what you'll get if you have to kill me to get it."

"I worked too hard for this."

"Did you?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Who killed Pookie?"

She sighed deeply. "Douglas was in way over his head. He thought he discovered something, and I just let him play because I figured he'd bring you in. See, I knew about the money way before I met Douglas. I used to go with Trent, and I would see Vincent Roderick give that ignorant redneck hundreds of thousands of dollars. He'd spend it all on guns and explosives, playing soldier, getting ready for a war that was never going to happen. So I encouraged the FBI to pay me to work for Roderick. Why not? I could get paid, get closer to the real money, you know what I'm saying."

Jacks nodded silently and let her keep talking.

"It was easy to track the money, but there were always too many men with guns around. Probably none of this would have happened if Douglas hadn't got caught. The dumb-ass let Roderick know that he was aware the money was being skimmed. I don't know what he expected. Roderick was stealing his own money. Douglas should have known something was up. Anyway, when Roderick had Douglas arrested for embezzlement to cover his own ass, I saw a way to get the money. You see, I knew about you, Riley Jacks. I knew you would kick ass and take names, and that was what it was going to take to get that key from Trent Davie."

"But Trent found out about you, didn't he?"

"Not really. He found out I was screwing Douglas. That's why they trashed me, but they didn't know the whole deal."

"How'd you know I'd figure it out?"

"If you hadn't, I would have called you." She grinned smugly. "But I knew that key was burning a hole in your pocket, and you'd have to know what it opened. Sixty-forty. My last offer."

"Deal," Jacks agreed.

She smiled, watched him divide the money, and didn't count it afterward.

"So you trust me," Jacks observed facetiously.

"I know where you live," she answered.

"One more question," Jacks

asked as Traci started to leave. "Who had Pookie killed, you or Roderick?"

A shadow he couldn't read clouded her face. Maybe it was sadness. Maybe she was just tired. "Why don't you leave that alone, Jacks. I'm going to testify against Roderick. He's going to jail for conspiracy. I'm going to say he ordered Douglas's death."

"Is what you say true?"

"I say it's best to leave well enough alone."

She disappeared into the hallway and into the bustle of the day.

Jacks stared at the closed door for a moment, then went to the bathroom to retrieve his tranquilizers. He popped two of them, waited a few minutes for them to settle, then made a phone call.

A steady pounding at the door eventually filtered through the chemical haze of the sedatives that fogged Jacks' brain. He dragged himself out of bed and stumbled toward the door, squinting through the peephole to see who was there.

"Sleeping late, Mr. Jacks?" Celosia made note of his disheveled state.

"Long night," Jacks said.

"I was in the neighborhood, figured you ought to know this. We've got Roderick for the weapons, explosives, domestic terrorism, but he's gonna walk for killing your cousin."

"I thought you had him cold," Jacks said.

"We lost our witness," the agent informed him. "The girl . . . Fel-

lows . . . we found her two days ago. She was killed. It was either a mugging or made to look like one."

"I'm sure the FBI has already considered that Roderick might have had somebody do her, since she could have put him away even longer."

"You don't have to tell us how to do our job, Mr. Jacks. We generally figure these things out."

"I'm sure you do."

Jacks slid back in the bed after

the agent left. He reached under the bed, retrieved a small suitcase, and counted the money inside one more time. Two hundred thousand dollars minus a finder's fee—what they charge on the street for picking up a package someone might not want to release. Justice comes in many forms. The thought made him smile. This time it cost him fifty thousand. He could live with that, and Pookie would probably understand. □

SOLUTION TO THE JULY/AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

Discrepancies prove that statements 2 through 5 are false, all others true. Spies from Xalmo are Idatz (Auk) the chef, Havik (Duck) the dentist, and Krich (Bluebird) the artist. Those from Yoland are Gerdo (Canary) the engineer, Jurdy (Eagle) the banker, and Krich (Bluebird) the artist. Krich is obviously the double agent.

The chief of intelligence in Yoland hears nothing of conversations between the Auk and Havik (7), or between the Duck and the chef (8), since all are from Xalmo. He does note that the Bluebird says Havik is the chef (2), whereas the Canary says Havik is the dentist (6). Since both should be telling the truth to fellow spies, one is guilty. But the chief has no way of checking whether Havik (presumably the enemy) is a chef or a dentist.

On the other hand, the chief of intelligence in Xalmo hears all conversations except that between the Canary and the banker, both being from Yoland (6). He notes that the Duck is obviously innocent (8), but the Auk says Gerdo is an engineer from Yoland (1), whereas the Bluebird claims Gerdo is not an engineer (5). Since both are talking to compatriots, both should be telling the truth. One is a double agent. A quick phone call to Passport Control reveals that no passport was ever issued by Xalmo to anyone named Gerdo. The Auk was telling the truth.

The Bluebird paid the ultimate penalty for his duplicity.

CODE NAME	NAME	COVER	COUNTRY
Auk	Idatz	chef	Xalmo
Bluebird	Krich	artist	double agent
Canary	Gerdo	engineer	Yoland
Duck	Havik	dentist	Xalmo
Eagle	Jurdy	banker	Yoland

MYSTERY CLASSIC

LARS BLOM AND HIS DISAPPEARING GUN

August Blanche



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/02

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of my schoolmates had an elder brother who was a gardener at one of the bigger estates near Stockholm. His name was Lars Blom, and he was thirty years old when I first met him. He was short in stature, but unusually broad-shouldered and strong. He had an almost ball-shaped face, was reddish-brown from health and sun, had alert black eyes, a somewhat hooked nose, and a fairly big mouth that showed two rows of white, broad teeth. Raven-black, horsehair-stiff hair hung down to his shoulders, but it was always well combed and parted, and sideburns of the same color and thickness were tied together under his broad chin. In short, he looked like "a devil of a fellow," an expression used about resolute and powerful people.

Lars Blom was unmarried, but had two underage relatives to provide for: a sister whom he kept in a finishing school and a brother whom he kept in the school at Klara. At every examination the gardener was present, usually in a green surtout with big mother-of-pearl buttons, and when he appeared, all our faces beamed with gratitude and happiness. For we knew that after the examination we would sit down in a ring around a bundle filled with apples and that the apples would be distributed evenly among all of us, without regard to proven diligence and skill during the semester. Even the teachers treated him kindly because he brought every one of them a cluster of grapes or other delicacies from his greenhouse, and the huge bunch of flowers that decorated the teacher's desk was a gift from him, too. The term fees to the teachers he mostly paid in kind. Therefore, one often could read on the list that circulated in the class: "A barrel of white apples and a half-peck of pears for jam making to be delivered next autumn." It was found among the sums: 13:16, 6:32, 3:16, money given according to each one's means. So one could certainly say that even though Blom, our schoolmate, was one of the most lazy and inert boys who ever went to school, the teacher's efforts were nevertheless not fruitless.

But one day in the middle of the semester, Lars Blom came to the school and said: "Now my brother has been eight years at Klara Higher School of Learning. He has read Latin for six years, but he does not know the name of one single flower and he does not know the difference between the vegetable and the animal kingdoms. Actually, he cannot even tell the difference between peas and pork in a yellow split pea soup with pork. When it is thundering, he thinks that Thor is out driving, and when it is windy, he says that Aeolus sits breathing hard in God-knows-what corner of the world. It is about the same with my sister in the girls' boarding school. The only thing she knows is that Calypso was not able to console herself when Ulysses went away, but that the nymph became as fond of Telemachus, the son, as she had been

*First published in 1863 in the collection Hyrkuskens berättelser (The Stories of a Horse-Cab Coachman).
Translated from the Swedish by Bertil Falk.*

fond of the father before. But this will never do. On the one hand, it is too much Latin, and on the other hand, it is too much flirtation, and in both cases I could not care less."

Then he took his brother along with him and went away. With distressed eyes we looked after the two brothers, and even the teacher seemed to be gloomier than usual. No doubt he, as well as we, foresaw that the next year would be a lousy year for fruits. It was as if Lars Blom, like the angel with the naked cutting sword, had driven us away from the Garden of Eden—and had done so because of the Tree of Knowledge in Latin and Greek, from which all of us were forced to eat in spite of the divine law of common sense.

I do not know what happened to our schoolfellow Blom. But a few years later his brother Lars, our old benefactor, became employed as a gardener with one of the richest land owners in the province of Skåne, a former Colonel L., a man known as a downright scourge to his tenants. Lars Blom had been warned against such a master, and he had been told how unwise it was to leave a place where he was very popular and practically in sole control of his profession and instead take a position with a person who had a special "whipping room" on his estate for the lecturing of his dependents.

"I have grafted upon trees considered to be impossible to graft on, and I have succeeded," Lars Blom replied, and he went away to Skåne in spite of all warnings. When he arrived at the estate, where he was to be the gardener, he found that both garden and greenhouse lay wasted.

"How many work days are given to the garden?" he asked the manager the day he arrived.

"One hundred in a year," the man answered.

"Do you consider it possible to keep garden and greenhouse in a defensible condition with that small assistance?" Lars Blom continued asking.

The manager shrugged his shoulders, but kept silent.

"To begin with, the greenhouse must be reconditioned," the gardener explained, "and then I must absolutely have at least four hundred work days per year."

"Must?" the manager repeated, smiling slightly, yet looking around with a furtive glance. "But you must talk about all that with the worthy colonel."

"That is exactly what I am going to do," Lars Blom uttered, then went to see "the worthy colonel."

"That one will not stay two days on the estate," the manager murmured after him, "and if he gets away from here with his back intact, then I am an ass."

Blom found "the worthy colonel" sitting alone in his office in front of his desk. He was a tall, thin, middle-aged man with a stiff carriage and

similarly stiff features. The lower lip went up and almost covered the upper lip. It was less a natural thing than a habit. It could be interpreted as contempt for everything. The eyes, protruding and somewhat big by nature, had become, through the habit of partly closed eyelids, small and peering. That meant snootiness. Colonel L. had no need for unnatural grimaces or for hanging out a signboard on a face that Nature herself had given a firm impression of hardness and cruelty already, perhaps for the same reason that she had given the rattle to the rattlesnake.

"I am the gardener, Lars Blom," Blom introduced himself.

"Go to the manager," the colonel answered, without condescending to give the newcomer as much as a quarter of a look.

"The greenhouse is not good enough. It has to be put right," Blom explained.

"Go to the manager! . . . Did you not hear what I said, man!" the colonel continued in a louder voice.

"One hundred work days are not enough, either. I must have at least four hundred," Blom continued, likewise raising his voice.

"What do you say, you dog!" the colonel shouted with a start, opening his eyes wide. It was perhaps the first time for a long time they were opened to the whole of their extent.

Blom repeated his demands, adding, "And all this I must get, inasmuch as my intention is not to cultivate brown beans instead of grapes or potatoes instead of pineapples!"

With a fierce curse, the colonel sprang to his feet from his desk and rushed with a raised arm toward the gardener.

"Lower your arm!" Blom called out, "because I cut all branches and twigs that are in my way."

Furiously, the colonel rushed to the wall and took down a rubber cudgel of a good size, but just as he turned from the wall, his eyes met the muzzle of something that looked like a gun, which the gardener kept aimed at his master's breast.

"I do not like corporal punishment, least of all the corporal punishment of the province of Skåne," Blom uttered with a lowered but distinct voice. "Therefore I tell you that every blow with a stick I will pay back with a piece of lead, and every scratch on my skin with a hole in your brain. I will be a generous payer, I should say so!"

The colonel, ghastly pale, stood for a while as if he were petrified. Then he rushed to the window and called out. Calmly, Lars Blom sat down on a chair. The office door was opened and some farmhands and crofters rushed in. They had, by chance, been outside the detached wing where the office was situated.

"Seize him! He is a highwayman, a murderer!" the colonel shouted to his people while he pointed at the new gardener.

"There must be something wrong with the master," Lars Blom said with an expression of the utmost sympathy. "Has he been in such a bad way for long?" he added in a half whisper, while he turned to the farmhands and pointed with a finger to his head.

"What a rascal!" the colonel bellowed. "Search his pockets immediately! He has a murder weapon and has right now threatened to blow out my brains!"

"God may comfort us for our poor master!" Lars Blom lamented and shook his head. "Well, the colonel will have his will; here are my pockets! Search them carefully, dear friends, so that the colonel will be convinced that it all was an empty confusion on his part."

At that he turned all his pockets inside out. The crofters and the farmhands, some of whom had already gotten to know the new gardener, looked from him to the colonel and back again amazed, but ultimately they carried out the search, without finding anything but a small cardboard box filled with moist snuff. The colonel himself took part in the search, but the result was not different.

"But," he shouted, foaming with fury, "I saw the gun with my own eyes when the scoundrel aimed it at me! . . . Maybe he has thrown it somewhere here inside the office."

Everyone started searching everywhere, under desks, sofas, and chairs, but the search proved useless, as before.

"Maybe one should inform Her Grace about the state of health of His Grace, so that a doctor can be sent for," Lars Blom suggested.

The colonel, shaken by a situation that for him was entirely new, began to tremble as if he had the shivers, and at last he sank down on a chair. The people feared he would be hit by a stroke, and so they poured water over him. Even Lars Blom tried to the best of his ability to assist the colonel's efforts to recover his senses, but in his eagerness he mistakenly seized the colossal inkpot from the desk and emptied its contents over "the worthy colonel." After that and some other rude attempts to assist, he left the office and headed for the garden and the greenhouse. Had he lingered for a while outside the building, he could have witnessed how the yelling farmhands and the crofters came rushing out of the office. They were pursued by "the worthy colonel," who was swinging his terrible cudgel to and fro, roaring like a lion and black in his face like a blackamoor.

Lars Blom was not informed about this new development between "the worthy colonel" and the farmhands until, standing in the door of a storage shed by the greenhouse, he saw the latter rushing past, chased by their horrifying master.

"Ha!" the colonel exclaimed. He checked himself in the middle of the chase when he saw the gardener, the root and the origin of all evil. Lars Blom avoided smiling slightly at the sight of the master's inked face,

where a pair of bloodshot, flame-throwing eyes rolled. He drew himself back into the storage shed, which was illuminated only by the light from the open door. Brandishing his stick, the colonel tore after him but stopped dead as he once again discovered in the right hand of the gardener the same gun that had threatened him in the office and which he had searched for in vain.

"Do not come here!" Lars Blom warned. "It is possible that I can be overpowered and maltreated, but you be can sure that the whipping-room for me today will be the sepulchral chamber for you tomorrow. I have not only come here for the sake of your garden. I have also come, and perhaps primarily so, in order to take the wind out of one who, as I have long since known, is number one among all unjust and cruel masters. But you do look dreadfully black," he added and laughed. "You must have turned yourself inside out today."

While Lars Blom made this speech, the colonel slowly backed up to the door, all the time with his eyes on the damned gun that beamed at him. But as soon as he was outside the storage shed, he slammed the door shut with lightning rapidity. He locked the padlock so that Lars Blom, before he knew where he was, found himself captured and in a dark custody. He heard the colonel cry out a scornful laugh and thereafter leave the place. But it was not long before he perceived the sound of steps and the voices of many people arriving.

"Yes, gentlemen!" he heard the colonel say. "I have met with the devil himself, but here I have him under lock and key, and I hope that he is now ripe."

Lars Blom saw the door opening and the colonel came in once again, this time followed by the manager and some of the people on the farm, plus two older gentlemen, who, as he later came to know, were the vicar and the rural judge in the district. Having been invited for dinner by the colonel, they had arrived and met their host just as he was on his way to the house of the manager to gather people.

"Now, you villain!" he heard the colonel say. "Out with the murder weapon that you tried to kill me with a second time and confess the truth, so that the process can be short."

"Gentlemen, you are my witnesses that the colonel has called me a villain and accused me of having tried to kill him," Lars Blom uttered with all the calmness in the world. "This is the second time today that I am a target for such insulting treatment in the presence of other people."

"Out with the gun!" the colonel continued.

"If I have a gun or some other murder weapon, or even as much as pruning shears," explained Blom, "then I will openly plead guilty to the serious crime that my master accuses me of. . . . But you will not find

anything, and I now fear, as I did before, that something must be wrong with the worthy colonel's head, for . . ."

The colonel raised his stick and was set to rush at the gardener when the vicar and the rural judge stepped in.

"He cannot possibly have been outside the shed since Mister Colonel himself closed it," the latter said, "and consequently he must have the gun with him or hidden here, unless he has swallowed it, which is impossible."

Thereafter, a second search was undertaken by both the manager and the rural judge himself, but it ended in the same way as the first. That is, they found nothing other than the aforementioned snuffbox, which was emptied and examined, as if they believed that a gun could be hidden inside. Amazed, they all looked at each other. The astonishment and indignation of the colonel cannot be described by words.

"You do not admit either that you turned the inkpot upside down over Mister Colonel?" the rural judge asked.

"I did," Lars Blom admitted, "but I mistook it for a carafe with water, when the colonel fainted in the office. Besides, I have just asked the colonel's forgiveness and he has forgiven me."

"Have I forgiven him!" the colonel screeched.

"Gee," Lars Blom continued, "the colonel was a moment ago here in the shed, and he himself joked about it and laughed and said, 'My dear Blom, one could easily believe that you were Luther and I was Satan, since you threw that inkpot at me.' That is exactly what the colonel said, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you obdurate wretch!" the colonel bawled, and once again he wanted to rush at Blom.

"But we have not yet examined the shed itself," the rural judge remarked, thus once again going between them. "The gun must definitely be put away somewhere here."

On that they began to search the small shed, floor, walls, and ceiling, but it was all in vain. The colonel, who was not the least zealous, happened, on top of his other misadventures, to bump into a huge wasps' nest that was attached to a roof truss. The result was that a number of hornets, the size of a pinkie, immediately swarmed out and began to hum around the ears of those in the shed. All of them rushed instantly out of the shed, screaming and gesticulating violently.

Like lancers with lowered lances, if not more dangerous, the wasps chased the fugitives. The rural judge and the vicar hopped about like mad among flowerbeds and ridges. They were at last forced to throw themselves headlong down on the edge of the garden pond and in turns plunge their heads into the green water in order to get rid of their enemies. Both had looked forward to eating a grand dinner with soup for a

starter, as the fashion is at dinners, but not that kind of green soup! They cursed in their heart of hearts both the soup and the host.

Worst hit, however, was the host himself, for the wasps, who by instinct had perceived the destroyer of their calm home, directed themselves mainly at him.

"Help, help! Come here, help!" he screamed, while he scratched his head with both hands and did a lot of floundering with his leg, very much like the jumping jacks whose legs and arms children move by means of a thread.

But everybody was busy protecting himself. The only one who took pity on the colonel was actually our friend Lars Blom, himself fairly protected by his thick, horsehair-stiff hair. He seized a large swab that he discovered in the shed among other firefighting equipment, made it wet in the pond, and then with emphasis, let it dance around the ears of his master.

"Ugh!" the master groaned. "Do not hit that hard! Ugh! Stop it, villain!"

"I only hit the wasps, only the wasps," Lars Blom replied, ceaselessly continuing his rescue work. "Six wasps can kill a horse, and the worthy colonel has at least a dozen in his mop."

"Ouch! Keep your hands off!" the colonel went on. "Stop it! You poke out my eyes, you arch villain!"

"Only the wasps, the wasps!" Lars Blom continued, persistently punching, now on the left and now on the right side of the colonel's head and now right on his skull.

At last the colonel made his choice and fled from the battlefield, and in that way the second tussle came to an end. The colonel was in bed for four days, affected by frenzy or whatever. During this period, Lars Blom was informed by the manager as well as by other people that by the express order of the colonel he had to leave the estate. But Blom explained that since a five-year contract was drawn up between him and the colonel, and that was a fact, it was his firm intention to be in the service of the colonel the whole contract period. The people on the estate and in the neighborhood did not know what to think of it, but most of them regarded the gardener with a certain respect. All of them admitted that the arrangements he had made in order to recondition the greenhouse and put the garden right showed skill as well as taste.

One day, shortly after the recovery of the colonel, Lars Blom was ordered to go to the colonel immediately. He went and found the colonel, whom he had not seen since the scene by the shed, sitting in a smaller room just inside the hallway of the big assembly rooms. The colonel looked somewhat pale and worn out, but his physiognomy was not gentler because of that.

"You are not going to be off voluntarily," the colonel began.

"No, not even involuntarily," the gardener answered.

The colonel, who sat by a table, took a written paper out of a box. He unfolded it on the table.

"This is the contract my agent in Stockholm, on my behalf drew up between us," he pointed out.

"Well, so what?" Lars Blom asked. "It is, of course, quite all right that you have one copy and I have another copy."

"You shall immediately endorse on this contract that tomorrow you will leave my service without any compensation."

Lars Blom stared somewhat surprised at the colonel, because it seemed very strange to him that the colonel, after what had happened between them, still could believe that he would be that manageable.

"I will certainly not," he answered anyhow.

"You must do it," the colonel assured him, "for otherwise I know the proper means to get you to do it," he added, seizing a thick rattan cane that was at hand.

Blom's surprise was further increased by this new threat, the uselessness of which the colonel should have known by now. Blom looked searchingly around the walls and lowered, after some pondering, his eyes to the floor, now showing the utmost humility and fear.

"You sign as I told you, you young rascal!" the colonel continued, approaching Blom while brandishing the rattan cane.

"I cannot do it, worthy colonel!" Blom replied. "In order to get into your service, I have refused the most advantageous offers from others. Beat me, Mister Colonel, kill me, but I am not signing."

Now it was the colonel's turn to be surprised. It was plain that he had expected an entirely different result from his threat and also that inwardly he felt deeply indignant that his expectations had not materialized.

"So, you do not want to shoot me today? You do not have the gun about you today, you bandit!" he shouted, as he dealt a hard blow to one of Blom's shoulders with his cane.

"To be maltreated and endure has been poor people's lot in all times," Blom lamented. "But to be accused of carrying about a murder weapon, when all your life you have been a peaceful man, that can move logs and stones. Say, am I a murderer, Mister Colonel?"

"Yes, much more than anyone who has had his head on the scaffold," the man screamed.

"The only thing missing now is to be accused of being a thief. Perhaps I am that as well?"

"That you are, if anyone is," the colonel continued with increasing hot-headedness, as if it were his intention to use all possible means of provocation.

"Nevertheless, I had the best possible references," Blom objected. "Perhaps the colonel also alleges that I have falsified them?"

"Of course you have!" the colonel bellowed and impatiently stamped his feet. "Many lesser blackguards than you have worn iron collars."

No sooner had the colonel uttered these words than Lars Blom jumped to the opposite wall and pulled a jib door open. It led to a built-in wardrobe, but now there were three men inside, one of whom was the county sheriff.

"Gentlemen!" Lars Blom cried out. "You are my witnesses that Colonel L. called me a murderer, a thief, and a falsifier and that he violently assaulted me, trying to force me to cancel our contract. The colonel has to be held responsible for these awful accusations and this serious violence. Oh! I see. There are even three holes in the jib door, enough for three eyes. You have all heard and seen what has taken place in this room. So much the better, gentlemen!" he added, and then he left the room at a rapid pace.

Dumbfounded, the colonel stood there, and flabbergasted beyond description, the county sheriff and his two companions emerged from the wardrobe. Thus the third tussle ended.

Already the next day, a writ of summons drawn up according to the regulations prescribed by law was served upon the colonel at a proper court. In it Blom not only referred to the county sheriff and his companions in the wardrobe, but also to the vicar and the district judge, who had been present at the earlier clash. But not only that. The evening of that same day, the colonel, who was alone in an arbor, was surprised by his terrible gardener, who once again had a gun in his hand, the same gun, which the colonel now clearly saw for the third time but was invisible to all others—the gun, which he had uselessly tried to bring to light by force and trickery.

"The blow you dealt out yesterday," Lars Blom said to him, "will cost you your life, but first you must be punished in court for your crimes and apologize in public."

Then he disappeared. The colonel's fit of rage cannot be described. The next few days he wandered about, shy and gloomy like a shadow, outlawed on his own territory. Superstitious, as are all despots, he began to ponder whether it was the devil himself who, disguised as a gardener, stayed at his estate in order to torture him even in this life. In his despair he asked his acquaintances for advice. And they recommended that he seek some kind of settlement in order to get rid of a gardener who strewed his path with this kind of roses and in order, furthermore, to have withdrawn a lawsuit that would create a public scandal, while incurring widespread malicious pleasure.

The task of talking to Lars Blom was entrusted to an impartial person, and Blom declared himself in favor of withdrawing the suit and

immediately leaving his position on two conditions: first, that his salary for all five years be paid to him unreduced; and second, that he be guaranteed furthermore an annual lifetime pension of five hundred crowns. These claims, though of a quite cheap and human sort to come from the devil, caused another fit of rage with the colonel. But at last he accepted the conditions, and one fine day Lars Blom, provided with the proper documents, returned to Stockholm and was received with open arms at the same place where he had been before.

"But," I once asked Lars Blom when I visited him in the country one summer day and he told me about his adventure in Skåne, "what did you do in order to make that gun invisible to everyone except the colonel?"

"Nothing could be more easy," Blom replied. He opened the fall-front of his bureau, searched in one of the drawers, and then returned to me, saying, "You can search every thread on my body and you will not find the gun you are looking for, but nevertheless it is so near at hand that I, in the next moment, can aim it at your forehead."

"Have you kept it in your hair?" I asked, and groped with my hands among his long thick curls.

Lars Blom laughed and pulled out from his right ear something that on the face of it looked like a thumbstall of black hide, but soon was found to be made from a film of rubber. This film Lars Blom put to his mouth, blew into it, filled it with air, and then tied its small hole. All this happened so fast, that I, before I knew where I was, saw something aimed at me that looked exactly like a gun, especially when it came to size, barrel, and butt. But when the air escaped, it once again became the barely discernible film it was before.

"It was with this horrible weapon that I scared the tyrant in Skåne," Lars Blom explained. "The way a diamond cuts another diamond, in a similar way one inflated thing suppressed another."

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Minneapolis homicide cop Marshall Bahr is back with an apparent suicide-by-hanging in K. J. Erickson's **The Dead Survivors** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95). Frank Beck was facing bankruptcy and a terminal illness, but Beck's son is certain that his father would not have arranged for the young man to discover the body. Then there are the numbers written on the man's arm, a detail which niggles at Bahr. Learning the explanation behind the numbers—the fact that the victim was descended from the First Minnesota Volunteers, the battalion who fought so bravely at the Battle of Gettysburg—merely pulls Bahr even deeper into the mystery surrounding Frank Beck's death. Erickson draws a sympathetic portrait of Bahr, an especially devoted father and a cop, and cleverly weaves some interesting historical detail into this contemporary murder mystery. Don't look here for gut-wrenching graphic detail or nail-biting suspense, but instead choose to spend time with a decent man who is very good at his job.

Lisa Gardner carries on in the tradition of Mary Higgins Clark with her successful suspense series featuring strong women protagonists. Her latest, **The Survivors Club** (Bantam, \$23.95), puts three women in the driver's seat: businesswoman Jillian Hayes, suburban housewife Carol Rosen, and college student Meg Pesaturo. The three women were all victimized by a man known as the College Hill Rapist, but when they banded together and went to the press to focus attention on the attacks, the case heated up. The result was an arrest and a case largely based on DNA evidence. The novel opens on the day the accused man comes to trial. It is also the first day back for Detective Sgt. Roan Griffin, returning after a breakdown triggered by two events—the loss of his wife to cancer, and the case of a serial child molester and murderer that led to the basement of his friend and next-door neighbor. This first day of trial, however, begins with a double murder. It will pull both Griffin

and the three women into a mastermind criminal's devious plot—and their worst nightmares. Well-drawn characters, loads of suspense, and a dash of romance—Gardner's trademark ingredients are all here.

Stringent, strong, and determined to the point of obsession is Nicola Griffith's protagonist, Aud Torvingen, in **Stay** (Double-day/Talese, \$23.95). The reader finds Aud restoring a log cabin she inherited in the North Carolina wilderness, where she has retreated after the death of her lover, a woman whom Aud had originally been hired to protect. It's also where her old friend and bartender Dornan finds her and asks for her help. His girlfriend Tammy, a self-centered woman for whom Aud feels little more than contempt, went off to New York City with her latest mentor and lover. That was months ago, not long after Aud fled town. Tammy has dropped from the face of Dornan's earth. It is not like her, he vows; she has always kept him on the string before. As a former police officer turned private operator, Aud is the logical person to go to New York. Aud does find Tammy—and much, much more. This plot has several twists and I won't give you any hints. The real power of this novel is in the author's stern, strong, accomplished heroine and the sheer, uncompromising beauty of her prose. Whether it's a person or a place or the space between the two where emotions reside, Griffith's writing is as spare as her heroine and packs as much punch.

Marian Babson's **The Cat Next Door** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$21.95) introduces readers to Margot and her famous—and recently infamous—family at their estate in England. Margot has returned to lend solidarity to the family from New York, where she's been living. It seems as if everyone has been in hiding of one sort or another, but perhaps it's understandable given the circumstances: the family is awaiting the upcoming murder trial of mild-mannered cousin Chloe, accused of fatally stabbing her free-spirited twin sister Claudia. Babson quietly acquaints readers with Margot and her kin, who ultimately—albeit unspectacularly—unmask the real killer. Penned by a pro, this one's sure to please fans who like their teapots with cozies and their cottages ivy-covered.

Be in Style...

with Heavy Cotton T's from

Asimov's and ANALOG

SCIENCE FICTION

SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT



Mail to: Dell Magazines Direct • 6 Prowitt St.
Suite Promo T • Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Asimov's Science Fiction T-Shirt (AST)

OLD OUT
S _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____ XXL _____ \$9.99 each \$ _____

Analog Science Fiction & Fact T-Shirt (ANT)

OLD OUT
S _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____ XXL _____ \$9.99 each \$ _____

Shipping & Handling _____ x \$2 \$ _____

(Add \$2 per T-shirt or \$6 for three or more.)

Deliverable to US addresses only) **Total:** \$ _____

☐ Enclosed is my payment. Please charge my: ☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD
ARD # _____ EXP. DATE: ____ / ____

ARDHOLDER'S SIGNATURE _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Order online or mail the order form with your payment today.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NSTS62

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Thom Johnston of San Francisco, California. Honorable Mentions go to Don VanDyke of Lawton, Oklahoma; Mark Truman of Laguna Niguel, California; Gary Cotton of Castro Valley, California; Art Cos-



ing of Fairfax, Virginia; Tom Bitters of Greenfield, Massachusetts; John Christopher Lopez of Houston, Texas; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; and Edward Delaney of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

HOW'D YOUR MAMA DRESS YOU TODAY?

by Thom Johnston

Jay was late again, so Ray ordered. As the waiter turned, Jay appeared, houndstooth hat in hand and sporting a new white with black pinstripe raincoat, the negative image of his twin's. Jay ordered "the usual" and preened for Ray.

"Mother's been gone three months and you're still rebelling? I wondered why you had asked about my coat. Had to get the exact opposite, right?" Ray guessed. He grinned and held up his hat. "But the hat's identical. Why fight it?"

Jay blanched and sat down, slamming his hat on the floor. "She's still doing it, the old cow." He kicked his hat into the corner. "I hated dressing alike. *Ray-Jay, Jay-Ray, how'd your Mama dress you today?* How did you stand it?"

Ray laughed. "It was just easier when she got her way."

The waiter arrived with two Caesar salads and two coffees, black. "Fate?" Ray teased. Jay glared. Simultaneously reaching for coffee, Jay flinched and grabbed his fork instead.

Later, Ray reminisced, "Mother had it hard after Dad ditched us."

"Fled," Jay corrected, spearing an anchovy.

"Always sacrificing . . ."

"Always the martyr," muttered Jay.

Ray ignored his brother. "Too bad she refused that washer/dryer for the pantry. I warned her that doing the wash in the basement would kill her some day." Finishing his salad, Ray mused, "She could be a real pain, but she did her best."

Jay sneered. Let Ray hoist her up on a pedestal. She got her just desserts; Jay had pushed her down the basement stairs.

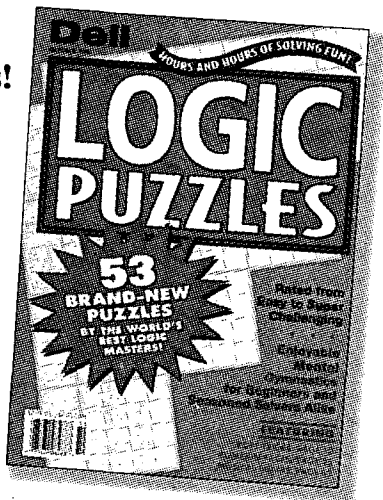
The waiter materialized. "Pie, boys?"

Dell Logic Puzzles Direct to Your Door!

If you love solving mysteries,
you'll love **Dell Logic Puzzles!**

Each issue delivers more
than 50 spell-binding logic
problems by the world's
best logic masters.

Subscribe today and you'll
get every intriguing issue
delivered direct to your door
and save 10%. Six issues,
just \$15.97.



To charge your order by phone, call toll free:

1-800-925-1701 Outside the U.S.A.: **1-303-678-8747**

Mail to: **Dell Logic Puzzles**
PO Box 54360,
Boulder, CO 80322

☒ **YES!** Enter my subscription to **Dell Logic Puzzles (DLGC)**
as indicated below.

☐ 1 year, (6 issues) \$15.97

☐ 2 years, (12 issues) \$28.97

☐ My payment is enclosed (U.S. funds)

☐ Bill me

Name _____
(Please Print)

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. Canadian and foreign orders add
\$5 per year (U.S. funds). Offer expires 9/30/03. **5P32**

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock September '02

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Elery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414 or email: classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG. Used paper and hardcover mysteries. Books West, POB 417760, Sacramento, CA 95841-7760. Visa/MC/Amex/Discover.

FREE LISTS. Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

Graphic Classics: Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes and other stories in comics and illustration. www.graphicclassics.com

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, www.gravematters.com

MYSTERY HOUSE BOOK SHOPPE. Used Books. On-line catalog. <http://www.mysteryhousebooks.com>

The murder was physically impossible! A scientist turns detective to solve this campus mystery. Read "The Law of Falling Bodies". Free excerpts at www.TLOFB.com.

EDUCATION

Wowed! John's Mystery Puzzle Maps (Travel / Educational! Entertainment game) - 1st and 2nd Edition series - design for ages 10 to Adult. Let the wonder fill your heart. Send \$6.95 each edition or \$12.00 for both. John's Arts & Crafts, PO Box 2473, Napa, CA 94558-3266. johnsartsandcrafts.com.

MERCHANDISE

NEW! AWARD - Winning murder mystery party game. "Devilishly Clever." www.MurderPartyGame.com

TRAVEL/TOURS

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE. 15th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, April 5, 2003. Seven day Mexican Rivera cruise aboard Princess Cruises' Star Princess. Guest writer, Nancy Picard. Call CruiseWorks at 1-800-876-6664.



UNUSUAL ITEMS

CLASSIFIED ADS under this heading or any other 21 subject areas we offer can be very rewarding.

FREE AD OFFER FOR OUR MYSTERY COMBO

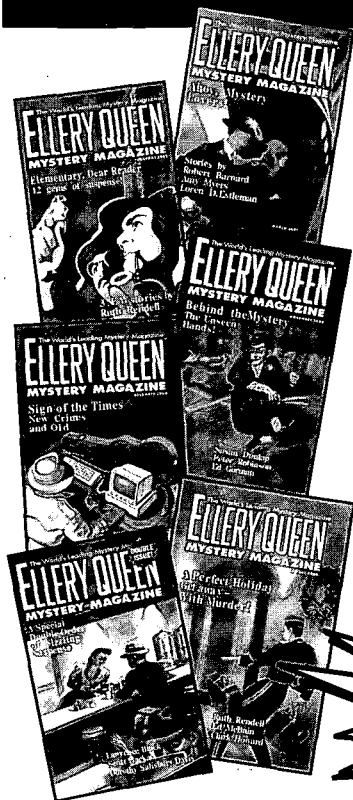
**PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES
AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!**

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 200,000 readers in our outstanding publications—Elery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock mystery magazines.

 Call today for a new rate card. 

DELL MAGAZINES CLASSIFIED DEPARTMENT
475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016
Call: (212) 686-7188 • Fax: (212) 686-7414
classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

6 Issues, Just \$9.97!



Subscribe today to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and you'll get every intriguing issue delivered directly to your door.

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 50 major awards and nominations just since 1990! With suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

SAVE 40%!

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

1-800-333-3311

Outside the U.S.A.: 1-850-682-7644

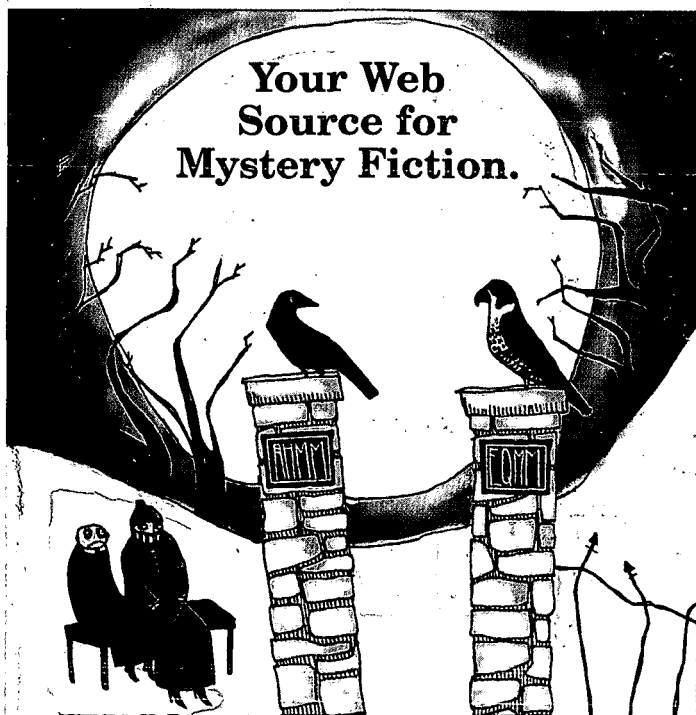


**Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052,
Boulder CO, 80322-4052**

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. *We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

5E10
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



**Your Web
Source for
Mystery Fiction.**

**Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the
leading short-fiction mystery magazines.
Log on and you'll enjoy:**

- Full stories on-line
- Award lists
- Trivia contests
- Book reviews
- Readers' Forum
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
Mystery
MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com

**LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED**